

Ungainly lexical borrowing? The case of the Anglicism *der Shitstorm* in German

Original Study

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Abstract: This paper addresses the origin, evolution, and explosive profusion of the German Anglicism *der Shitstorm* referring to social media outrage across all registers in German. The word *Shitstorm* was declared *Anglicism of the Year* 2011 in the context of a project initiated by a group of German linguists that was designed to characterize Anglicisms as a positive contribution to the German lexicon. Using detailed corpus analysis, this paper explains the origin of the English etymon, its evolution and resemanticization over time. By comparing data from news media corpora in English and German, this study explains why the Anglicism *Shitstorm* is not perceived as vulgar in German. While German linguists behind the *Anglicism of the Year* intended to change the negative perception of the increasing influence of English in contemporary German, this analysis explains why Anglicisms like *Shitstorm* in German can be problematic in international contexts. From a wider perspective on the semiotics of a general German Anglophilia, the profusion of the Anglicism *Shitstorm* in German is representative of precisely the social media practices the word is used to describe. The case of the Anglicism *der Shitstorm* in German is therefore symptomatic of the influence social media have on all media.

Keywords: German *Shitstorm* – Anglicism – Pseudo-Anglicism – frequency – genre – social media

1. GERMAN ANGLICISM OF THE YEAR 2011: SHITSTORM

The word *Shitstorm* was voted *Anglizismus des Jahres 2011* (Anglicism of the year 2011) in 2012 in an online project initiated by a group of German linguists.

What were the criteria for selection? According to the initiative's website, the linguists on the selection committee for the *Anglizismus des Jahres* narrow down a list of nominations each year and then let the public decide the winner by popular vote.

Die unabhängige Initiative "Anglizismus des Jahres" würdigt seit 2010 jährlich den positiven Beitrag des Englischen zur Entwicklung des deutschen Wortschatzes. Bisherige Anglizismen des Jahres waren *leaken* (2010), *Shitstorm* (2011), *Crowdfunding* (2012), die Nachsilbe *-gate* (2013), *Blackfacing* (2014), *Refugees Welcome* (2015), *Fake News* (2016),

Influencer (2017), *Gendersternchen* (2018), *...for future* (2019), und *Lockdown* (2021). (AnglizismusdesJahres.de)

'Since 2010, the independent initiative 'Anglicism of the Year' acknowledges the positive contribution made by the English language to the development of the German lexicon. Recent *Anglicisms of the Year* include *leaken* (2010), *Shitstorm* (2011), *Crowdfunding* (2012), the suffix *-gate* (2013), *Blackfacing* (2014), *Refugees Welcome* (2015), *Fake News* (2016), *Influencer* (2017), *Gendersternchen* (2018), *...for future* (2019), and *Lockdown* (2021).'

The main goal of the *Anglizismus des Jahres* initiative was to respond to the overwhelmingly negative attitude towards Anglicisms in the popular discourse with a more positive take on lexical borrowing from English. The great number of press reports, both domestic (e.g. *Frankfurter*

Allgemeine Zeitung 2012) and international (e.g. Katy Waldman for *Slate* 2012) on the 2011 winner undeniably provided media attention for the linguists behind the competition and clicks for the respective outlets. In their mission statement, the organizers declare that they consider Anglicisms “a positive contribution to the evolution of German vocabulary” and believe that linguists have a responsibility to contribute more actively to the mostly uninformed public discourse about language. (Stefanowitsch et al. 2014:18)

With a report on the state of the German language entitled *Reichtum und Armut der deutschen Sprache* ‘Wealth and poverty of the German language’ edited by the Deutsche Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung and the Union der deutschen Akademien der Wissenschaften (2013), the heavyweights of German linguistics offered a scholarly contribution to the public discourse about the state of the German language. In the English book description, the editors of the report declare that

[the] status of the German language has perhaps never aroused more heated debate: scholars argue that the language is in visible decline, that its lexicon and grammar are increasingly impoverished, not least through massive infiltration by Anglicisms. (Deutsche Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung 2013)

The linguists behind the *Anglizismus des Jahres* expressed their disappointment in the report, whose format and style failed to reach a wide audience, while instead providing a scholarly overview more appropriate for linguists. (Stefanowitsch et al. 2014:20)

In his contribution to the report “Anglizismen im Deutschen”, the linguist Peter Eisenberg explained that the focus of the report was meant to be not on Anglicisms in general, but the *perception* of anglicisms in public discourse (2013:59). However, he predicated his own contribution on a deliberately narrow definition of linguistic analysis in which “[die] eigentliche Domäne der Sprachwissenschaft bleibt die Sprachkritik im engeren Sinn.” (62) This ‘linguistic criticism in the narrow sense’ is characterized by a familiar descriptive approach that focuses on the linguistic phenomena associated with Anglicisms in German, their categorization, taxonomy, quantitative analysis, and neutral description. Only in the concluding paragraph, Eisenberg allowed himself a cautious remark about their *perception*:

Allerdings legt der Zeitgeist einen Missbrauch von Anglizismen besonders nahe, etwa wo einem präntiösen Globalismus gehuldigt wird (2013:115)

‘In fact, Anglicisms are likely misused (in contexts) where the *Zeitgeist* is suggestive of a display of pretentious globalism.’

While there have been proposals for defining new categories of the pragmatic meaning of Anglicisms (cf. Onysko & Winter-Froemel 2011), Eisenberg’s report does not address questions like: Why are Anglicisms constantly increasing in written and spoken texts in German? Why

do some people like Anglicisms while others consider them the downfall of the German language?

In his contribution to the 2013 report, Eisenberg’s preferred definition of Anglicism is adopted from Busse (2019 [2001]:134) and includes

“jede Erscheinung der deutschen Sprache [...], die auf Transferenz der englischen Sprache zurückgeht”

‘all phenomena in German [...], that are the result of transfer from English.’

One of Eisenberg’s most notable observations is that all phenomena of linguistic transfer from English are, in fact, what some linguists have called Pseudo-Anglicisms (e.g. Busse 2019 [2001]: 138) (although he dislikes the term), because Anglicisms are not English lexemes, but German lexemes according to Eisenberg:

Das alles läuft auf den Schluss hinaus, dass ein Anglizismus in den allermeisten Fällen formal und in sehr vielen Fällen semantisch andere Eigenschaften als das entsprechende Wort im Englischen hat. Anders gesagt: Bei Anglizismen haben wir es in der Regel mit dem zu tun, was man Pseudoanglizismen genannt hat. Auch dies ist ein Grund den Begriff Pseudoanglizismus aufzugeben.

‘This leads to the conclusion, that most Anglicisms differ formally and in most cases semantically from their English equivalents. In other words: All Anglicisms are what has sometimes been called Pseudo-Anglicisms. This is also a reason to abandon the concept of Pseudo-Anglicism.’ (Eisenberg 2013:72)

In the Global Anglicism Database (GLAD) (an ambitious project that allows for the comparison of Anglicisms across many languages), Pseudo-Anglicisms constitute one of eight categories. Within the category Pseudo-Anglicisms, German *Shitstorm* (not yet included in GLAD at the time of writing) would likely fall under the subcategory of “resemantizations, i.e. domestic sense of English words, as in German *Handy* ‘mobile phone’” (Gottlieb et al. 2018:7). It is the process of *resemantization* that explains why it is possible that the word *Shitstorm* is not perceived as vulgar in German; and why even former Chancellor Angela Merkel used it in formal contexts to refer to social media outrage.

2. ANGELA MERKEL’S SHITSTORMS

Angela Merkel was documented using the word *Shitstorm* at a townhall meeting in Heidelberg in 2012. During a discussion about hate speech in the context of social media, the moderator asked whether it wouldn’t be a good idea to require a sort of online ‘driver license’; to which Chancellor Merkel quickly replied:

1) „Ja, aber wir machen hier keine Vorschläge. Sonst haben wir morgen einen ‘Shitstorm’ zu gewärtigen.”

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'Yes, but we are not making any proposals here. Otherwise, we'll have to face a 'shitstorm' tomorrow.'

It has been suggested that it was the Chancellor's documented use of the word (in addition to its declaration as *Anglicism of the Year*) that prompted the inclusion of the word *Shitstorm* in the Duden dictionary in 2013 with the definition:

Sturm der Entrüstung in einem Kommunikationsmedium des Internets, der zum Teil mit beleidigenden Äußerungen einhergeht¹

'storm of outrage in an internet communication medium that may include insults'

The following example follows the Duden definition:

2) Die TV Fernsehreportage über die schlechte Behandlung der Angestellten hatte einen Shitstorm ausgelöst.

'The TV report about the abuse of (an) employee(s) had caused a shitstorm.'

Another widely publicized moment that stirred international interest was Chancellor Merkel's use of the word *Shitstorm* in her speech at the technology conference *Digital-Gipfel 2018* in Nürnberg, where she said:

3) Die Frage, wie wir die Gesellschaft im Zeitalter der Digitalisierung gestalten, treibt uns umfassend um. Das stellt sich auch in den Plattformen dar, die über das Jahr hinweg arbeiten – immer in einer Mischung aus Industrievertretern, Wirtschaftsvertretern und Vertretern der Politik. Damit haben wir in den letzten Jahren auch eine Arbeits- und Lernmethode für uns in der Politik entwickelt, wobei sehr deutlich geworden ist, dass wir alle uns sozusagen in einer Sphäre befinden, in der wir uns noch nicht so gut auskennen. Ich habe früher dazu einmal „Neuland“ gesagt. Das hat mir einen großen Shitstorm eingebracht. Deshalb will ich das jetzt nicht einfach wiederholen. Jedenfalls ist es aber in gewisser Weise noch nicht durchschrittenes Terrain.

'We are concerned with the question of how to create a society in the digital age. That is also evident in the platforms that address this issue throughout the year – always comprised of industry representatives, economists, and policy makers. That is how we have established working and learning procedures for us political representatives, and it has become very clear, that this is an area we are not yet familiar with. I have referred to this as "unknown territory." I earned myself a big *Shitstorm* for saying this. That is why I don't wish to repeat this here. Nevertheless, it is in certain terms, new terrain for us.' (Bundesregierung 2018)

To be clear, this was a formal speech by the former Chancellor addressing her cabinet members and industry representatives (concerned with the challenges of moving Germany forward into the digital age) while standing at a podium with a microphone in an auditorium in Nürnberg in the presence of news media. The text can be downloaded from the German Government website *Bundesregierung.de*. Unlike in English texts where the word is often truncated with an asterisk as *Sh*tstorm* (e.g. Waldman for *Slate* 2012), this is never the case for German language texts. This leaves no doubt that the word *Shitstorm* is used in contexts of the most formal register and is not perceived as a vulgarity in German.

As Melissa Eddy concluded in an article for the *New York Times* (NYT), "[most] Germans remain unaware that in English, the word is considered a vulgarity, and its use is not limited to internet outrage." (Eddy 2018) For her 2018 article, Melissa Eddy consulted the linguist Anatol Stefanowitsch, the initiator of the *Anglicism of the Year*, who explained to the NYT (2018):

"I'm sure she wouldn't use a direct German translation," Mr. Stefanowitsch said of the chancellor. "But she can use a word like this in English, because it does not have the associations that have grown over time in the original language."

This was a chance for Stefanowitsch to contribute more actively to the mostly uninformed public discourse about language (cf. Stefanowitsch et al. 2014:18); however, his defense of the Chancellor's use of a lexeme that sounds vulgar to an English speaker may have been taken out of a larger explanatory context by the NYT. As a compound, the English word *shitstorm* may have evolved over time, but it is not clear what associations to any derivation of English *shit* may, as he suggested, "have grown over time in the original language" (Stefanowitsch quoted in Eddy 2018) to explain away its inherent vulgarity.

3) ETYMOLOGY AND USAGE OF ENGLISH SHITSTORM

In the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), the English compound is presented as

"shitstorm *n.* originally *U.S.* a frenetic or disastrous event; a commotion, a tumult."

The oldest OED attestation is a line of dialogue from Norman Mailer's 1948 novel *The Naked and the Dead*, a work of war fiction, "written with such intensity, such bald realism, such unrestrained accuracy of detail in speech and thought, that all but the tough-skinned will turn from it, feeling reluctant to look again on the baring of men's inner beings under stress [...]" (Kirkus

¹ The only synonym listed in Duden is *Beschimpfung* 'insult'. The etymology is presented as "englisch shitstorm, aus shit = Scheiße und storm = Sturm", 'English shitstorm, from shit = Scheiße and storm = Sturm' The grammar follows the German noun *der Sturm* 'storm' as in all German compound nouns: *der Shitstorm*; Genitiv: *des Shitstorms*, Plural: *die Shitstorms*

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Reviews 2011) The OED quotes one of the marines in the novel saying:

4) "The hell with Brown... He's been missing all the shit storms." (Mailer 1948:62)

Another attestation from Ken Kesey's *One flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962) likewise describes a scene in which the novel's iconic patients in a mental hospital

5) "finally got to arguing with each other and created such a shitstorm." (206).

A third and more recent OED example came from a 2005 interview with grunge rock star Scott Weiland (of the band Stone Temple Pilots) in *Esquire* magazine (2005 Apr. 135/1), characterizing his life as

6) "culminating in a shitstorm of arrests, overdoses, domestic disharmony, prison."

Marked as *coarse slang* in usage, it is fair to say that the OED attestations of English *shitstorm* exemplify contexts and discourses of harsh, and sometimes violent, subcultures of unedited, raw vulgarity.

With the earliest written attestations of the English word roughly established in American realist fiction of the 20th Century, the best insights on how the usage of English *shitstorm* may have changed over time can be gleaned from a corpus query. The Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) allows for the observation of changes and variation by genre (TV and film subtitles, spoken, blogs, web, fiction, magazine, newspaper,

academic texts), and offers a range of query types, including the possibility to limit to and compare across genres and time periods. It is comprised of 20 million words per year between 1990 and 2019 at the time of writing (with the same genre balance year by year).

The oldest example for the English compound *shitstorm* found in COCA is a 1990 article in *Mother Jones* magazine, in which the authors, Clark Blaise and his wife Bharati Mukherjee, both authors of literary fiction, describe how the publication of Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* in 1988

7) "invited a shitstorm" (Blaise & Mukherjee 1990).

The article describes the events that followed the publication on September 26, 1988, by Viking Penguin in London. This included the banning of the *The Satanic Verses* in India; demonstrations and burning of the book in Bradford, England; riots in India and Pakistan in February 1989 that resulted in nine deaths and hundreds injured; the Ayatollah Khomeini calling for the death of Salman Rushdie on February 14, 1989 and a price of \$1.5 million placed on Rushdie's head; riots against the book in Bombay; the firebombing of two bookstores in Berkeley, California; the murder of two Muslim religious leaders in March 1989 for opposing the death threat; a bomb blast in London in 1989 that killed a terrorist who reportedly plotted to kill Rushdie; four bombs planted outside a Penguin bookstore in September 1989, which caused half of the booksellers surveyed to refuse to sell the paperback when published; and a confidential risk assessment for Viking Penguin that warned in October 1989 "that the threat to three thousand company employees"



Figure 1 English *shitstorm* genre distribution and definition COCA retrieved September 2022

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[...] “is undiminished.” (Blaise & Mukherjee 1990). Referencing the intensity and realism of war fiction and the format and style of *Mother Jones* magazine that targets a progressive audience, the authors deployed the English word *shitstorm* to capture the magnitude and brutality of the rage and violence that followed the publication of Rushdie’s fourth novel.

Blaise and Mukherjee’s article turned out to be one of only very few magazine articles documented in the COCA corpus between 1990 and 2019 (including the one in *Esquire* magazine quoted in the OED). A search by genre, shows that English *shitstorm* has been used mostly in blogs, the general web, film, television, and fiction, with *no use at all* in news media or academic discourse. Most notably, there are no tokens in the category *spoken text* at all (outside of film and television). This means the word has not been used in spoken English by US journalists or commentators on television or radio, or anyone in any news media between 1990 and 2019. To be clear, COCA includes transcripts of more than 127 million words of unscripted conversation from more than 150 TV and radio programs like *All Things Considered* (NPR), *News-hour* (PBS), *Today Show* (NBC), *60 Minutes* (CBS), *Hannity* (Fox), or *Good Morning America* (ABC).

See the Figure 1

Overall, there is only modest increase in frequency in the US corpus with an actual drop in frequency between 2010 and 2019. A quick overview of the movies since 2000 paints a consistent picture of varied contexts of action, horror, crime, and comedy where predominantly male dialogue is often characterized by the intensity and realism of vulgar speech:

Drunk Parents (2019) Comedy, Rated R
The Accountant (2016) Action, Crime, Drama, Thriller, Rated R
Me and My Mates vs. The Zombie Apocalypse (2015) Comedy, Horror, Not Rated
Cold in July (2014) Crime, Thriller, Rated R
The Family (2013) Comedy, Crime, Thriller, Rated R
Enemies Closer (2013) Action, Thriller, Rated R
Celebrity Sex Tape (2012) Comedy, Not Rated
Janie Jones (2010) Biography, Drama, Music, Not Rated
Behind Enemy Lines: Colombia (2009) Action, Thriller, Rated R
State of Play (2009) Crime, Drama, Mystery, PG-13
Stop Loss (2008) Drama, War, Rated R
Turn the River (2007) Drama, Rated R
Slither (2006) Comedy, Horror, Sci-Fi, Rated R
A Good Year (2006) Comedy, Drama, Romance, PG-13
Blue Demon (2004) Comedy, Horror, Sci-Fi, Rated R
Blade: Trinity (2004) Action, Adventure, Horror, Sci-Fi, Rated R
The Matrix Revolutions (2003) Action, Sci-Fi, Rated R
Eye See You (2002) Crime, Horror, Mystery, Rated R
[...]

While the OED definition of the English noun *shitstorm* as “a frenetic or disastrous event; a commotion, a tumult” is generic and wide, COCA distinguishes two definitions: A

generic one similar to the OED definition; and a second more specific one, both marked as vulgar:

1. {slang/pejorative/vulgar} A chaotic unpleasant or violent situation
2. {idiomatic/vulgar} Considerable backlash from the public

The first, more generic, definition can be exemplified with usage in contexts where the word *shitstorm* refers to a fight, an argument, a cascade of chaotic events, or even a chaotic person, especially in fiction, film, or television. An example for this, is the following dialogue from the movie *Drunk Parents* (2019), whose main characters drown their sorrows of financial distress, bankruptcy, and foreclosure in alcohol, while desperately finding ways to make money:

8) My wife is so fucking drunk. Your acting was brilliant. Well, I couldn’t have gotten home if you didn’t put me on third, baby. I feel great. [...] Oh, Frank, is it over? Are we finally out of this *shitstorm*? I don’t know how, but I think we did it, didn’t we? (*Drunk Parents* 2019)

The second, more specific, definition of ‘backlash from the public’ caused by something controversial or provocative crystallized in the corpus in contexts like the following example from the digital media platform *Mashable* (which originated as a blog). The context was the Harvey Weinstein scandal and the #MeToo (Connellan 2017):

9) Milano was one of the early responders to fellow *Charmed* co-star Rose McGowan’s #WomenBoycottTwitter protest on Friday. The protest took place after McGowan was temporarily suspended from the platform amidst the Harvey Weinstein *shitstorm*.

It is this more specific use that has increased in recent years in the context of social media as a semantic narrowing in English, although the vulgarity and usage in contexts that fit the more generic definition continues to be attested throughout all time periods in COCA. Nevertheless, the English lexeme *shitstorm* remains characterized by very low frequency (category 205 in COCA) and is clearly limited to the lowest register of vulgar speech (primarily in film and fiction) and casual argumentative writing in blogs and discussion forums and very few exceptions in magazine articles (e.g. Blaise and Mukherjee 1990). Most notably, there are *no tokens* from academic texts or news media (spoken or written) between 1990 and 2019 in COCA.

See the Figure 2.

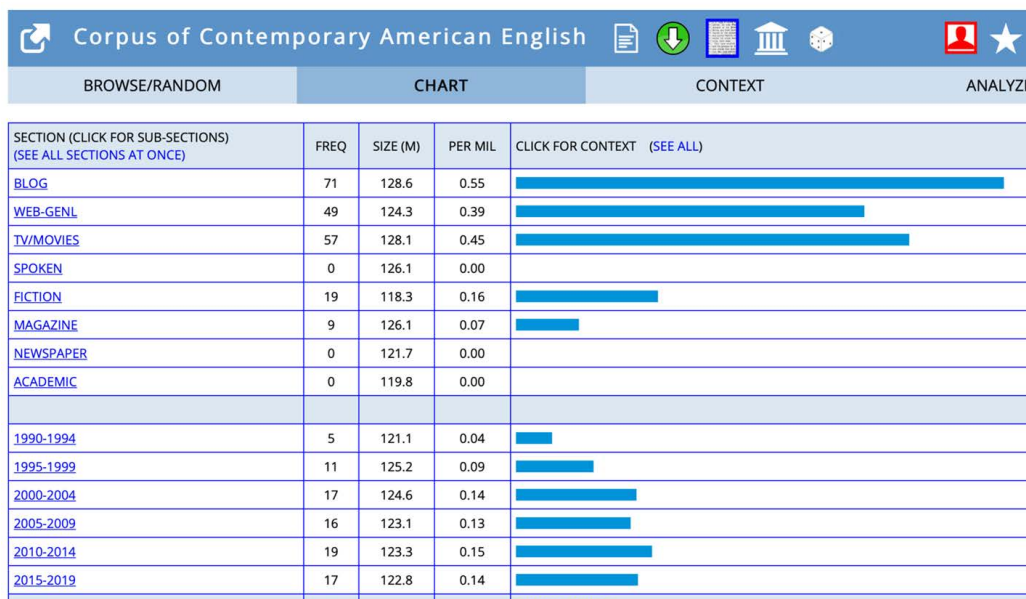


Figure 2 English *shitstorm* frequency across genres and time periods COCA retrieved September 2022

To go beyond the year 2019, the Leipzig Corpora Collection offers an English news corpus based on material from 2020 that contains 32,196,275 sentences.

Information on corpus:
English > News 2020

Description

English news corpus based on material from 2020

Details

Name	eng_news_2020	Sentences	32,196,275
Language	English (W)	Types	4,250,385
Genre	News	Tokens	688,052,729
Year	2020		

Link to the corpus

https://corpora.uni-leipzig.de?corpusId=eng_news_2020

Figure 3 Leipzig Corpora Collection English News 2020 retrieved September 2022

There are only 15 occurrences of English *shitstorm*, mostly direct speech quotes with some exceptions like this example taken from an op-ed for *Slate* published in October 2020. In this short contribution, Dan Kois reflects on how he should feel about the news that President Trump had been infected by the Coronavirus (Kois 2020):

10) To laugh at the *shitstorm* currently overwhelming the Republican Party, including Trump, is not to disrespect life, as the outraged tone police might insist. To laugh at what the Republicans and Donald Trump have brought upon themselves is to *respect* life, to understand that to take wanton risks with life was always a fool's game.

Most of the 15 examples in the English news corpus are from online platforms and consistent with the results gleaned from COCA between 1990 and 2019, confirming very low frequency and contexts of low register characteristic for argumentative blogs.

4. HIGH FREQUENCY AND USAGE OF DER SHITSTORM IN GERMAN

Switching to an equivalent German news corpus in the Leipzig collection looking for the Anglicism *Shitstorm* in German reveals a different picture. This corpus is very similar in size to the English news corpus, containing 33,323,616 sentences from 2021:

Information on corpus:
German > News 2021

Description

German news corpus based on material from 2021

Details

Name	deu_news_2021	Sentences	33,323,616
Language	German (W)	Types	5,570,476
Genre	News	Tokens	525,578,241
Year	2021		

Link to the corpus

https://corpora.uni-leipzig.de?corpusId=deu_news_2021

Figure 4 Leipzig Corpora Collection German News 2021 retrieved September 2022

With 2,025 occurrences, the German word *Shitstorm* ranks in frequency class 13 (a class that contains German words like *Zeitgeist* or *Marktwirtschaft*). The word graph from the *Leipzig Wortschatz* corpus shows the

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most important collocates for the Anglicism *Shitstorm* in the context of social media, especially Twitter.

See the Figure 5.

Most importantly, the examples refer to many high-profile German news outlets (from Germany, Austria, and Switzerland), including *Tagesschau*, the most important news program on German public television.

Currently, there is no talk show on German public television or high-profile news outlet in the German-speaking world, in which the Anglicism *Shitstorm* is not used profusely by prominent and highly respected journalists, authors, TV anchors, or commentators, whenever referring to backlash on social media. A quick glance at the examples in the Leipzig news corpus lists all the important outlets where German *Shitstorm* is used to describe internet outrage. For instance, the public television news program *Tagesschau* (compare to PBS *NewsHour* or BBC *News*) published an interview with Gyde Jensen, a Member of the German Bundestag, representing the liberal democrat FDP (Freie Demokratische Partei) about the reaction to her congratulatory Tweet after the controversial election of an FDP representative as Governor of Thüringen with support from the populist AfD (Alternative für Deutschland):

11) **tagesschau.de**: Die FDP hat im Fall Kemmerich in Thüringen Fehler gemacht und dies rückblickend auch eingestanden. Sie selbst haben Kemmerich kurz nach seiner Wahl mit dem Stimmen der AfD zum Ministerpräsidenten in einem Tweet beglückwünscht. Ein Fehler?

[The FDP made mistakes regarding the election of Kemmerich in Thüringen and then admitted that in hindsight.

You congratulated Kemmerich in a Tweet right after his election as Governor with votes from the AfD. Was that a mistake?]

Jensen: Auf jeden Fall. Es ist der bisher einzige Tweet, den ich wieder gelöscht habe. Und zwar nicht, weil ein berechtigter *Shitstorm* begann, sondern weil der Tweet falsch war. Ich hatte die Lage überhaupt nicht überblickt und war vorschnell. Mich beschäftigt das immer noch ab und zu, weil ich mich frage, wie mir das passieren konnte. Das geht ja den allermeisten Menschen so, wenn sie Fehler machen, für die sie sich schämen.

[Of course. This was the only Tweet I ever deleted. And that is not because of the warranted *Shitstorm* that had started, but because what I wrote in my Tweet was wrong. I was too quick and had no clear overview of the situation. It still bothers me because I don't understand how I could make such a mistake. I think this happens to most people when they make mistakes and feel ashamed.]

Another example is from a report by Janne Knödler for *Der Spiegel* (2021) about the online outrage following the election of the new speaker of the youth organization of the Green party *Grüne Jugend* Sarah-Lee Heinrich in November 2021:

12) Sarah-Lee Heinrich ist gerade mal zwanzig Jahre alt. Die frisch gekürte Sprecherin der Grünen Jugend hat in ihrer recht kurzen politischen Laufbahn schon viel erlebt. Einen wütenden *Shitstorm* auf Twitter zum Beispiel. Seit gestern trendet ihr Name als Hashtag, #sarahleeheinrich. Vorgeworfen werden ihr die Inhalte alter Tweets. (Knödler 2021)

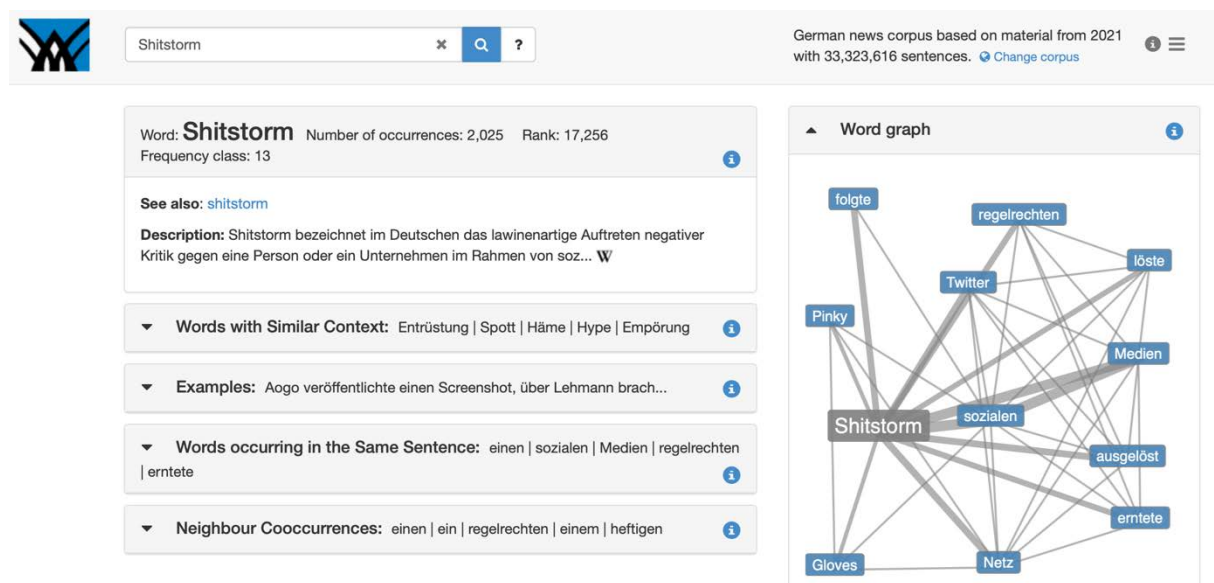


Figure 5 Leipzig Corpora Collection German *Shitstorm* word graph in German News data set from 2021 retrieved September 2022

'Sarah-Lee Heinrich is only 20 years old. The newly elected speaker for the *Grüne Jugend* has been through a lot in her relatively brief political career. For instance, a wrathful Shitstorm on Twitter. As of yesterday, her name is trending as Hashtag #sarahleeheinrich. The outrage was caused by the content of some old Tweets.'

Journalists who represent prestigious newspapers like *Die Zeit* or magazines like *Der Spiegel* use the word *Shitstorm* in German regularly both in formal interviews or discussions (on TV talk shows or news commentary on public television) and in formal writing to refer to what could otherwise be called *Flut von Beschimpfungen* 'flood of insults', *Empörungswelle* 'wave of outrage', or *Online-Wutausbrüche* 'online-rage' (Gathman, et al. 2012 *Der Spiegel*). *Zwitscher-Sturm* 'tweet storm' (Gathmann 2010) has been used in analogy with *Twitter-Sturm* 'twitter storm', presumably to avoid the limitation to *Twitter*. The *Duden* definition *Sturm der Entrüstung* 'storm of outrage' is certainly an elegant alternative. The word *Netzhetze* 'web hounding', was proposed as an alternative by the Gesellschaft für Deutsche Sprache (2012) a government funded association concerned with language change in German. These examples make it difficult to characterize German *Shitstorm* as filling a lexical gap and instead suggest the consideration of theoretical concepts like non-catachrestic innovation, implicatures of manner, or markedness effects (see Onysko & Winter-Froemel 2011). The semantic narrowing to social media outrage, especially on Twitter, suggests that *Shitstorm* in German is used exclusively and perceived as social media jargon.

The blogger and author Sascha Lobo suggested *Netzempörungsturm* 'internet storm of outrage' in an op-ed for *Der Spiegel*, in which he apologized for contributing to the popularization of the word *Shitstorm* with a presentation he gave at the internet and blogger conference *re:publica* in Berlin in 2010 (Lobo 2013). Although he may give himself too much credit for being the main catalyst for the explosion of German *Shitstorm*, his analysis that he came across the English word in blogs around 2009 is consistent with the high occurrence in US blogs documented in COCA (see above). Lobo believes he picked up the word in 2009 in blogs and then used it as the topic of his *re:publica* presentation entitled

13) *How to survive a shitstorm* (2010).

Recall that it had been selected as *Anglizismus des Jahres 2011* in 2012, the same year Chancellor Merkel used the term in a town hall meeting in Heidelberg. Lobo's main point in the op-ed, however, was to express his regret for unintentionally contributing to the Anglicism's popularity. Explaining that he didn't mean to "make the world a little worse", he apologized for contributing to the "popularization of this stupid word" (Lobo 2013) and appealed to his fellow writers and journalists to stop using it:

14) Deshalb plädiere ich dafür, das längst in den Brunnen gefallene Kind wenigstens anständig zu beerdigen - und

das Wort *Shitstorm* nicht mehr unbedacht und inflationär zu verwenden.

'[...] I suggest that we abandon the word *Shitstorm* and no longer use it so carelessly and so profusely.'

He must be commended for recognizing that not all Anglicisms make "a positive contribution to the evolution of German vocabulary" (*AnglizismusdesJahres.de*), especially when they are undeniably vulgar in English. It is one thing to include a vulgar lexeme of high frequency in the *Duden*, but it is another matter entirely to celebrate it as *Anglicism of the Year*. By investing some research effort in explaining the origin of this phenomenon (although without consulting any academic sources), Lobo contributed to the public discourse about language in a way that Anatol Stefanowitsch would like to see from linguists (Stefanowitsch et al. 2014:18), except Lobo's analysis may not be deployed with the descriptive neutrality some linguists may wish to maintain. While there would have been better sources to make his point, I share Lobo's basic conclusion that the widespread use of German *Shitstorm*, especially by journalists and commentators in highly respected news media is problematic, especially from an international perspective.

5. THE GERMAN ANGLICISM DER SHITSTORM FROM A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

Among German Studies scholars and linguists in the United States (and possibly elsewhere), the German *Shitstorm* phenomenon is both a source of amusement and an unpleasant reminder of the proposal that Germans somehow have a preoccupation with excrement. This idea has been explored in a 1984 book by the Berkeley folklorist Alan Dundes, whose unpleasant theses and examples everyone likes to ignore but cannot.

In *Life is like a Chicken Coop Ladder. A Study of German National Character Through Folklore* (1984), Dundes compiled a collection of cultural observations, proverbs, poems, lyrics, riddles, jokes, games, tropes, and images across the ages to illustrate his conjecture of a "German penchant for anal metaphors" (Dundes 1984:48) that will leave any reader with German roots or affinities depressed and ashamed. For everyone who is familiar with this idea, the examples, and their implications, it is difficult to hear the word *Shitstorm* out of the mouths of prominent German journalists, authors, talk show hosts, and commentators, not to mention the former Chancellor, and not see Dundes vindicated, whether they regard him a provocateur or serious cultural anthropologist.

To be clear, as the data in COCA from 1990 – 2019 clearly confirmed, no reputable US journalist would use the word *shitstorm* in English to refer to "internet outrage" or "digital blowback" (Eddy 2018) This means that those most keen observers who watch what is said and written in German are continuously revising their own conclusions about *German national character* based on the cultural texts shared most widely in the digital arena.

A library search of the word *shitstorm* brings up almost exclusively German titles in academic journals, because only the German-speaking researchers who are concerned with the phenomenon of internet outrage are using the Anglicism *Shitstorm* in academic discourse in German. (e.g. Pfeiffer 2021, Wieser 2020, Mühlhoff, 2019, Eickelmann 2017, Kaiser-Müller 2016) Wherever international conferences and conventions bring people from different parts of the world together, German academics are likely to refer to social media backlash as a *Shitstorm* when they speak English regardless of what contexts they may find themselves in, thereby possibly eliciting not only a negative perception of national character, but *personal character*. Anglicisms like *Shitstorm* can be a liability especially wherever German professionals with high proficiency in English find themselves in international contexts. The Head of media relations for the European Central Bank, Michael Steen, is certainly not alone in “[...] trying to explain to his German colleagues “for at least five years” that it “isn’t really O.K. in English” to use the term.” (Eddy 2018)

In his book *English as a Global Language* (2001), David Crystal describes what he calls World Standard Spoken English (WSSE):

People who attend international conferences, or who write scripts for an international audience, or who are ‘talking’ on the Internet have probably already felt the pull of this new variety. It takes the form, for example, of consciously avoiding a word or phrase which you know is not going to be understood outside your own country, and of finding an alternative form of expression. (Crystal 2001:187)

What he means by WSSE is the kind of English journalists from all over the globe use to make their ideas clear by avoiding local or national idioms that may not be understood elsewhere (such as, for instance, sports metaphors from baseball or cricket) or whose connotations may not be neutral in style. When British journalists speak or write WSSE, they consciously avoid the expression *fortnight* and say *two weeks* instead. When people speak or write WSSE, they find a circumlocution in the absence of a “regionally neutral term” (Crystal 2001:187). When speaking English, German speakers must be aware that *German Anglicisms are not regionally neutral terms* and cannot be assumed to match the socio-pragmatic profile of the English etymon. The German Anglicism *Shitsorm* is an especially unfortunate mismatch in register and style. All the German-speaking high-profile journalists and commentators, who are currently using the Anglicism *Shitstorm* to refer to internet outrage in formal contexts of high register in German would do well to find an alternative expression whenever they find themselves speaking in English in front of an international audience or, as David Crystal put it, whenever they are ‘talking’ on *the Internet* in English.

6. SOCIOPRAGMATIC IMPLICATIONS OF THE GERMAN SHITSTORM PHENOMENON

At a conference on *Globalization and the Future of German* held at NYU in 2002, many points of view were represented that still persist two decades later: There were purists concerned with the decay of the German language through the influence of English, those concerned with the international perception of German, its possible demise in the context of the European Union, whose motto *United in Diversity* may ultimately lead to English as the official (not just the unofficial) *lingua franca* of Europe. There were the beginnings of recognizing ‘Kiezdeutsch’ (although under a different name) as an emerging variety of German; and with characteristic neutrality, the diligent explications of linguists who prefer a narrow definition of linguistic criticism; and one semiotic approach to Anglicisms in German that explained their potential for polarization. (see Gardt and Hüppauf ed. 2004)

A semiotic perspective on Anglicisms in German allows for a connection of linguistic phenomena to a more general German Anglophilia that has many multimodal manifestations. Language change must always be placed in the context of a sign-interpreting community and processes of cultural appropriation to find the right descriptive techniques that characterize the connections between the verbal and the non-verbal. For instance, English job titles like German *Product Manager* for what used to be called *Sachbearbeiter(in)*, or German *Team Assistant* instead of *Sekretär(in)* came into use because they avoid feminization and create a more gender-neutral perception of the job and a more egalitarian approach to the workplace, deemphasize hierarchy, and evoke a feeling of global connection, mobility, freedom, and innovation. What does a German speaker signify by referring to internet outrage as a *Shitstorm* instead of *Empörungsturm* ‘storm of outrage’ or any other alternative expression in German? One aspect is what speakers signify (intentionally or unintentionally) about themselves, their linguistic awareness, style, or intended effect. The Anglicism *Shitstorm* in German certainly offers some efficiency over the more complex morphology of German compounds like *Netzemöpfungsturm* that may sound pretentious, stiff, or old-fashioned in comparison to the perceived casual American coolness of the English etymon. Anglicisms are always, whether speakers are conscious of it or not, a kind of copying or imitating of an aspect of Anglo-American culture. (cf. Linke 2019) They inherently affirm the original or at least its origin as a source of welcome inspiration, representative of the global *Zeitgeist*, an attitude that may just result in what Peter Eisenberg meant by “pretentious globalism” in his contribution to the report on the state of the German language. (2013:115)

An example of pervasive Anglo-American transfer are the many German late-night (and other) TV shows that are copies of American formats. For those familiar with David Letterman, the *Harald Schmidt Show* was unbearable, while viewers who were unaware of the ‘original’ could enjoy it unencumbered by the comparison and the

embarrassment of Schmidt's imitation. Today, there is hardly a German late-night show that is not a copy of an American original. They are enjoyable to the uninitiated German audience, but the keen observers who know the American shows are burdened by the comparison and more likely to perceive them as imperfect copies. The enthusiasm over the 'coolness' of the new import is at the same time diminished by the sense of defeat that comes with the awareness of *imitation*. Social media platforms and the associated practices and jargon are amplified by the possibility of constant personal involvement.

In their book *Die vierte Gewalt* (2022) 'The Fourth Estate', the philosopher Richard David Precht and the sociologist Harald Welzer describe patterns of observable decline in German quality news media over the past two decades that explain how the media often create the illusion of a majority opinion that does not actually exist. One key development they describe is the negative influence of social media on the *Qualitätspresse* 'quality press' (as opposed to *Boulevardpresse* 'yellow press'), and a blurring of the boundaries between the different tiers. Precht & Welzer (2022) explain how patterns of simplifying, moralizing, and personal attacks that are characteristic of social media (the very phenomena referred to as *shitstorms* in vulgar discourses in English) have become more frequent in German quality press outlets that are increasingly seen as proponents of politically progressive opinions:

Die Massenmedien in Deutschland sind *keine* Vollzugsorgane staatlicher Meinungsmache. Sie sind die Vollzugsorgane ihrer eigenen Meinungsmache: mit immer stärkerem Hang zum Einseitigen, Simplifizierenden, Moralisierenden, Empörenden und Diffamierenden. Und sie bilden die ganz eigenen Echokammern einer Szene ab, die stets darauf blickt, was der jeweils andere gerade sagt oder schreibt, ängstlich darauf bedacht, bloß davon nicht abzuweichen. Diese Angst ist der bestmögliche Dünger für den Zerfall der Gesellschaft. Denn Maßlosigkeit und Einseitigkeit des Urteils zerstören den wohlmeinenden Streit, das demokratische Ringen um gute Lösungen. (Precht & Welzer 2022)

The mass media in Germany are *not* proponents of government policy or opinion (as is often assumed). They are the proponents of their own opinion making process: with increasing tendencies of simplifying and moralizing arguments, eliciting public outrage and the defamation of individuals. They represent their own echo chambers of opinion, constantly concerned with what others are saying and writing, anxiously trying to stay within their range of established narratives. This fear of deviating from a perceived majority opinion fuels societal fragmentation. This uninhibited amplification of a perceived consensus prevents real argumentative discourse, the democratic process of finding good solutions. (Precht & Welzer 2022)

The phenomenon of internet outrage or social media backlash that Germans call a *Shitstorm* on public television and in prestigious press outlets is symptomatic of

the patterns Precht & Welzer (2022) see as the erosion of standards of style that characterizes recent developments as quality media in Germany integrate patterns that evolved from social media, especially Twitter. The preference for an English vulgarism like *Shitstorm* (and its perception as international social media jargon) over a German compound like *Netzempörungsturm* is analogous to the tendencies of coarse social media practices to invade all contexts and registers (even the most formal) in German.

The explosion in frequency of the Anglicism *Shitstorm* across all genres and registers in German signifies a phenomenon that has spun out of control in all its polarizing power, eliciting both enthusiasm and embarrassment, blind imitation, and the blurring of boundaries between social media practices and quality media discourse. The profusion of the Anglicism *Shitstorm* in German, therefore, represents precisely the precipitous decline of standards of style associated with social media practices the word is used to describe.

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