

Denglish

A cause for concern?

The Institute for the German Language in Mannheim is a non-university-affiliated institution for the study of the contemporary use of the German language. Andreas Fischer spoke with Dr. Annette Trabold, a linguist, who heads the Institute's public information department.

What is your Institute's view on the use of Denglish in the German language?

The expression Denglish is loaded – it implies that English words are already over-used in German. In fact, a look at official listings of German words reveals that between 1880 and 1986 the proportion of Anglo-words in the German language rose from 1.36 to 3.46 percent. At first glance, Anglo-terms stand out in advertising, sport, the computer industry and in business. But you have to differentiate between words that stand out in advertising and the media, and those that find their way into everyday usage. Personal observations are not necessarily representative of overall trends.

Where the use of foreign words hinders proper communication it might be better to use German alternatives. However, a lot of foreign words have found their way into regular German: *Magazin* is Italian, *Gitarre* is Spanish, *Alkohol* is Arabic, *tapezieren* (to wallpaper) is French, *Humor* and *Sport* and *Film* are all English. All of these words have become part of the German language and are no longer seen as foreign but completely natural.

At what point then does the natural use of English words in German become "Denglish" or, if you like, unwanted?

When English terms are not used to describe something new – in most cases that's the reason for borrowing foreign words in the first place. Or if an English term causes misunderstandings and the thing or matter-at-hand can just as easily be described in German without a loss of meaning. But as I said, the term "Denglish" is, in itself, a loaded expression and can reflect an individual impression. Others might draw the line elsewhere. Many people feel threatened by change and feel the same way about the development of language or, rather, newness in language.

What are the reasons for the popular use of English words in place of German ones?

If products with English or American names didn't sell so well, advertisers wouldn't use them. Many people would simply rather buy a "City Shirt" than something called a *Herrenoberhemd*. In order to appear less provincial and more sophisticated people sometimes prefer using English words. Second, lots of people like to demonstrate how well-travelled and international-in-outlook they are by dropping English words and expressions into their conversations now and again.

You also get young people differentiating themselves from adults, not only through their clothes and their behaviour, but also through the way they speak. Using English terms is a part of that. Sometimes, English terms might be used in politics for strategic reasons, to cloud over a controversy – exactly *because* no one understands them. Recently, we had the term "Job-Floater" – no one had any idea what it really meant. At other times, Germans simply use Anglo terms without even thinking about them, they are just part of natural vocabulary.

What are the longer term consequences of the constant use of Denglish, in your view?

So-called Denglish words come and go, like any trend. What I view as more problematic is occurring in the sciences nowadays where German is not used at all. Everything is written down in English. Developing thoughts in your own language is always better than writing them out in a foreign language. The trend away from Latin as the language of science led to a better understanding and involvement of the general population in the sciences. English is now becoming the only official language of science and, once again, broad sectors of the population are being shut out of debate.

How do you expect the use of Denglish to develop?

You cannot predict how a language will develop, but languages are changing all the time. If the German language – the vocabulary, the grammar, the style of its use – didn't change at all, then we might still be speaking a cultivated form of middle-high German from the year 1200.