From the ‘Götz-Zitat’ to *Fack ju Göhte*. How thematising taboo language can enrich learning German as a foreign language

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From the 'Götz-Zitat' to *Fack ju Göhte*. How thematising taboo language can enrich learning German as a foreign language

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This article considers the forms and functions of taboo language in German and explores its use in a range of communicative contexts. With advanced learners of German studying modern languages in UK Higher Education as a target group, the article will address the current absence of this topic in the GfL classroom, the challenges of exploring it with learners, and how potential problems can be overcome. Taking a broadly linguistic-cultural approach, with a focus on specific language-related themes, selected resources will be showcased that feature or thematise taboo language, with suggestions of how they could be employed constructively with advanced learners. It will be argued that addressing taboo language in the GfL classroom is vital in enabling learners of German to acquire a full range of spoken and written styles and registers, and in facilitating a sophisticated understanding of the communicative, sociolinguistic and sociocultural implications of using (or avoiding) taboo language.

1. Introduction

Taboo language is a key component of communication, whether language users employ it or avoid it. It occurs in emotional utterances, functions as a marker of social identity, and is present in dialect and youth language, for example. It is found in various social and cultural contexts, including media, politics, literature and film, and features increasingly in online as well as offline communication. Goethe may not seem an immediately obvious point of reference for a discussion of how to thematise taboo language in German for language learners, yet it is in many respects a fitting place to start. The quotation in the title references Bora Dağtekin's trilogy of *Fack ju Göhte* film comedies, released in 2013, 2015 and 2017, rendered in a humorous quasi-phonetic spelling.[1] The title is not only a challenge to the reverence usually accorded to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe; it also makes use of one of the English language's most successful loan words ('fuck'), used in particular by younger speakers. Moreover, the film itself also includes

[1] The literal translation of the title is 'Fuck you, Goethe!'. However, the film trilogy was released to English-language audiences as *Suck Me Shakespeer*. A comparison of the German and English titles alone would merit a fruitful discussion with learners.

many examples of taboo language that offer themselves as a useful teaching resource (see Graffe 2019). The link to Goethe is strengthened further in the context of taboo language with the (in)famous 'Götz-Zitat' ['Götz quotation'] 'er kann mich im Arsche lecken!' ['he can kiss my arse!'], from Goethe's play, *Götz von Berlichingen* (1984 [1774]). The quotation is significant in highlighting the cultural, historical significance of such taboo expressions and their place in a work of classic literature.

Despite a wealth of such historical and contemporary examples of taboo language, and despite many calls for it to be addressed in language learning (see for example, Mercury 1995, Schröder 1997, Mugford 2008, Horan 2013, Graffe 2019), there remains little guidance on how to incorporate this in learning materials and in the classroom. This article therefore constitutes an enhanced plea to thematise taboo language in the GfL classroom, through a sociolinguistic, sociocultural lens. The focus will be on thematising taboo language for advanced learners of German at university level in the UK. Modern languages degrees in the UK aim to combine fluency in the target language (typically CEFR C1 or C2) with advanced knowledge of the target-language history and culture. Thus, the article will present and discuss materials that could be employed with such learners to deepen their understanding, not only of the key linguistic features and communicative functions of taboo language in German, but also of its presence in a range of German styles, sociolinguistic varieties and discourses.

2. Introduction

As mentioned above, taboo language features in a range of stylistic and sociolinguistic varieties; it could therefore be incorporated in the ongoing drive, spear-headed by applied linguists and teachers of modern languages, to include these varieties in the GfL curriculum. Stollhans (2020), Watts (1994, 2000) and Durrell (2006, 2017) argue that German teaching at university level in the UK tends to focus squarely on the acquisition of formal, written language, and that the curriculum leaves little opportunity for acquiring informal, everyday spoken language. From a sociolinguistic perspective, Langer (2010) and Stollhans (2020) explore the long-standing resistance to incorporating language varieties that arise for a number of reasons, including teachers' unfamiliarity with non-standard varieties, and a fear that it would prove too complicated and distracting, particularly for beginners who are grappling with basic grammatical structures. Making students aware of stylistic and sociolinguistic varieties, particularly at inter-

mediate and advanced levels is, however, an increasing priority in the modern languages curriculum. This is in no small part due to the influence of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which places sociolinguistic competences on an equal footing with linguistic and pragmatic competences (Stollhans 2020: 6).[2] The 'Linguistics in Modern Foreign Languages' project, co-ordinated by academics from the Universities of Birmingham, Bristol, Leeds, Newcastle and Westminster in the UK, working together with school teachers of German, French and Spanish, has advocated since 2017 for the role of sociolinguistics in creating a MFL curriculum that introduces learners to national, social, regional and stylistic varieties of a language, and has created some invaluable materials for the classroom.[3]

The reluctance to address taboo language can be attributed to understandable concerns about the appropriateness of this topic for the classroom (Hartmann & Faulkner 2002, Dewaele 2008). It is also linked to negative attitudes to non-prestigious varieties of a language, which have been well-documented for German and other languages. Informal, vernacular language and regional varieties are still stigmatised as incorrect, arising from a faulty knowledge of 'proper', i.e. formal, standard language (Stollhans 2020), and/or a sign of 'sloppiness' and 'laziness'. Such linguistic puristic attitudes are prevalent even among students taking a modern languages degree and are difficult to dislodge, so entrenched are they by the time they start their undergraduate studies. Davies provides the not-untypical example of undergraduate students claiming that English speakers' pronunciation of the medial [t] in 'bottle' as a glottal stop is because of laziness rather than a feature of a regional variety (2010: 385). Students' attitudes about their L1 (in this case English) are often projected onto their L2 or 'LX'.[4] Their desire to learn 'proper' German can lead to their rejection of any sociolinguistic information about stylistic, regional and social variation. A lack of sociolinguistic knowledge, however, can result in uneven levels of acquisition – not only in terms of linguistic, but rather in sociolinguistic and communicative competence. Students may use overly formal or informal language in an inappropriate context. This is often harmless in itself; German-language students report that L1 speakers react with amusement to their very formal

[2] https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/home.

[3] See the project website for more details: https://linguisticsinmfl.co.uk/.

[4] Dewaele argues that the label 'LX' is preferable to 'L2', 'L3', etc., as it can refer to 'any foreign language acquired after the age at which the first language(s) was acquired, that is after the age of 3 years, to any level of proficiency' (2018a: 238).

sounding German in casual-speech contexts (Watts 2000), with comments such as 'That sounds very formal', or 'No one would say that in German (anymore)'. Using taboo language is, however, a riskier enterprise with higher communicative stakes. Therefore, a blend of pragmatic, sociolinguistic and cultural knowledge is required to ensure that it is used (or avoided) in an appropriate way.

2.1 What is taboo language? Some working definitions

It seems appropriate at this juncture to clarify what is meant by 'taboo language'. Starting with definitions of 'taboo', Allan explains the phenomenon as 'proscriptions of behaviour arising out of social constraints on the individual's behaviour where it is perceived to be a potential cause of discomfort, harm, or injury' (2018: 3).[5] In their article on addressing taboos in teaching German as a foreign language, Hartmann & Faulkner articulate the challenges of defining taboos, let alone make them part of language tuition: "[t]aboos are more than mere church and moral orders. Taboos are not (only) about rules and regulations dictated by an outside party. Taboos seem to carry an inherent do not touch sign, often hard to explain and even harder to overcome" (2002:129).[6] Taboo language articulates what behaviours and phenomena a particular community considers to be dangerous, unacceptable or unpleasant, including sexual activities, with incest being the most taboo, bodily functions, in particular excretion, and body parts associated with sex and excretion (Aman 1972; Allan 2018). Taboos surrounding religious language, i.e. curses ('Flüche' in German) also arguably belong to this group, although here the taboo arises not because the behaviour or phenomenon itself is abhorrent, rather the invocation of a divine being in an inappropriate context constitutes the taboo act. Taboo language can be employed in a variety of contexts, notably in the form of cursing and swearing. In what follows, a distinction will be made between cursing and swearing, although there is some degree of overlap, and, particularly in US English, 'cursing' can be used as the general term for emotional language that invokes religious and non-religious taboos. Cursing, in the narrower sense, tends to draw on religious vocabulary, and historically was seen as a transgressive act, calling on God or another divinity to act on an individual's behalf. Examples from German include 'scher dich zum Teufel' [lit. 'go to the devil', but the

[5] According to the *OED*, the English word taboo is borrowed from Tongan, Māori and possibly other Oceanic languages, with the first recorded instance of the word by the explorer James Cook in 1777.

[6] For a fuller discussion of taboos, see Freud 1950 [1013] and Webster 1973.

closest English equivalent is 'go to hell!'], or 'Hergottsackrament -kruzifix' [lit. 'Lord-God-sacrament-crucifix'] in Bavarian German (Horan 2011: 19; Aman 1972: 180-181. See also Gauger 2012).

Swearing is "the strongly emotive use of taboo terms" (Allan 2018: 12). Allan identifies four main functions of swearing: expletive, abuse and insult, expression of social solidarity, stylistic choice, signalling the speaker's attitude (Allan 2018: 12-13. See also Allan & Burridge 2009).[7] The importance of swearing as an expletive, or to insult someone is well-known, but its function in forging social bonds is arguably less apparent to many language learners. These functions are central to everyday communication and to successful participation in a language community, a compelling reason to address both the linguistic features, as well as sociolinguistic and communicative contexts for swearing in the language learning environment.

The functions of taboo language in the form of swearing are largely shared across languages; however, the expressions used may differ considerably, and this is a challenge for the language learner. In his linguistic study of vulgar language, aptly titled *Das Feuchte und das Schmutzige* ['The Moist and the Filthy'] (2012), Gauger argues that German constitutes a "Sonderweg" ['special path'] or "Sonderfall" ['special case'], as its vulgar expressions are scatological rather than sexual: "Die sexuelle Referenz dient uns Deutschsprachigen weit weniger als unseren (näher oder entfernten) Nachbarn als Mittel der Beschimpfung und der Beleidigung" ['For swearing and insulting purposes, the sexual reference is of considerably less importance to us German speakers than to our close and more distant neighbours'].[8] Transferring or translating expressions from learners' L1 to their LX language is a common feature of language acquisition, predominantly in the early stages. With taboo expressions, however, this becomes particularly problematic, risking confusion and amusement at best.

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[7] These overlap largely with Steven Pinker's five categories of swearing: 'descriptively (*Let's fuck*), idiomatically (*It's fucked up*), abusively (*Fuck you, you motherfucker!*), emphatically (*This is fucking amazing*), and cathartically (*Fuck!*)' (2007: 350).

[8] Both 'Beschimpfung' and 'Beleidigung' potentially translate to 'insult' in English, although 'Beschimpfung' refers more to swearing at someone, or scolding them, whereas 'Beleidigung' denotes the intention to offend.

2.2. Taboo language in an interlingual context: negotiating the pitfalls of over- or underestimating offence

An obvious and important reason for addressing taboo language in the language classroom is to alert learners to the offensiveness of taboo terms, to avoid their causing what I would term 'unintentional and disproportionate offence'. In his research on emotional speech and taboo language in multilingual speakers, Dewaele points to the potential for 'pragmalinguistic failure' and 'sociopragmatic failure' that LX users may experience if they have 'an incomplete semantic or conceptual representation of the words in question' (2018c: 220). Here, the emphasis is on *failure*, but on a social, communicative rather than solely formal linguistic level. As Allan remarks, 'shared taboos are a sign of social cohesion' (Allan 2018: 1) governed by a complex system of social and cultural practices, rights, rules and patterns. The LX speaker typically occupies the status of an 'outsider' in this system; it is not only knowing which taboo words can be used in an appropriate context, it is also a matter of communicating with L1 speakers who will weigh up whether the LX user has 'the right to use these taboo words' (Dewaele 2018c: 220). Taboo language presents a dilemma for LX speakers. On the one hand, it is a key component of emotional, expressive speech, and can signal affiliation with a particular social group. On the other hand, the lack of familiarity with this complex system, as outlined by Allan (2018) above, results in the speakers not intuitively recognising the emotional force of a taboo word or expression, and possibly relying on their own L1 experience, which may not map neatly onto another language. Here, differences may arise between LX speakers or learners who are exposed to the language in an informal environment, at home, for example, and those who acquire the language at school or work, typically sites of more formal and less emotional communication (Dewaele 2018c: 221). It is worth noting that this is not always a matter of *underestimating* the offensiveness of taboo words. Dewaele's studies of multilinguals' use of and attitudes to taboo words (2016, 2017, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c) found that LX users tended to *overestimate* the offensiveness of these words, one significant exception to this being the 'c-word' (Dewaele 2018b).

For the majority of students of German at UK universities, German will be their 'LX' (although some may be (near-)L1 or heritage speakers). As such, they are becoming bi- or multilingual and need to navigate a variety of socio-communicative environments, many of which they will not have operated in previously. What Rösler terms 'the sanctuary of the classroom' (2000) tends to shield them from the 'messiness' of interaction

in the L1 environment, until they encounter it during interaction with L1 speakers. For those studying one or more languages as part of a four-year undergraduate degree programme in the UK, the year abroad (typically in the third year of study) is spent in a country where the target language is used.[9] Students often find that their sharpest learning curve occurs during a year abroad, as they are exposed to a range of communicative situations that are not necessarily addressed in the classroom. While immersion in the target language environment during this year is an effective way of expanding students' familiarity with different varieties, registers and styles; it is not foolproof. As a rather amusing example, during a final-year German oral exam I conducted many years ago, a student said something in error, and corrected himself with the words 'Ach, I Sautrottel!' [Oh, I am such a wazzock!'[10]], thereby signalling his impressive command of colloquial Bavarian German, albeit a little startling and not entirely appropriate for a formal context. This is an example of spoken interaction; however, communication happens increasingly online, through social media and instant messaging. Young(er) learners in particular may encounter taboo language in these online spaces, outside of the classroom, without context and without indication of the severity of the language used. It would be beneficial if sensitising learners to this type of language could be started sooner than the year abroad, i.e., in the first two years of university study, or preferably (if cautiously) with A Level students in schools, and with more formal guidance, rather than relying on trial and error.

3. Thematising taboo language: existing resources

Notable exceptions to the lack of guidance on and resources for this topic include Graffe (2019) for German, and Verbaan et al. (2013) for Dutch. Graffe's 2019 doctoral thesis on swearing in contemporary German and the tabooisation of swearing in teaching German as a second or foreign language offers some insightful and (socio)linguistically founded suggestions on how swear words and insults in the *Fack ju Göhte* trilogy can be used to familiarise learners with taboo language. Graffe's extensive analysis of swear words in German, using contemporary corpora, forms the basis of recommendations for the German as a foreign language classroom. Grouping the swear words according to

[9] Students taking two or more languages as part of their degree programme may divide the year between countries.

[10] The literal translation for 'Sautrottel' would be 'pig idiot'. 'Stupid idiot' would be more idiomatic, but robs the phrase of its regional flavour, hence the choice of 'wazzock'.

specific linguistic-pragmatic-thematic categories (comparisons with other languages, language and power, youth language, collocations of taboo words) is a sensible and productive approach, Graffe argues, as it avoids the "reine Vermittlung eines Kanons an Schimpfwörtern" ['simply imparting a canon of swear words'] (Graffe 2019: 97).

The Routledge Intermediate Dutch Reader (Verbaan et al. 2013) provides a model of how taboo language can be addressed in a textbook. It demonstrates how to integrate the formal linguistic characteristics of taboo vocabulary with its sociolinguistic, pragmatic and cultural features. It devotes one of its twelve chapters to the topic, eye-catchingly titled 'Shit, ik vloek' ['Shit, I'm swearing']. Its inclusion among other sociocultural and political topics emphasises that this is not a random or bizarre linguistic phenomenon but rather something that is common to most speakers. As the chapter's opening sentence declares "Vloeken doen we (bijna) allemaal …Vloekwoorden zijn bovendien interessant studiemateriaal omdat ze cultureel bepaald zijn: ieder volk vloekt op zijn eigen manier." ['We (almost) all swear … Moreover, swear words are interesting objects of study because they are culturally determined: every people has its own way of cursing'] (p.95).[11] This is followed by six questions:

a. Wat is vloeken eigenlijk? Is het gebruik van de woorden God en Jezus in sommige gevallen ook een vloek? [What is cursing? Can using the words 'God' and 'Jesus' in some contexts also constitute a curse?']
b. Wat zijn typische vloeken in je moedertaal? Ken je Nederlandse vloeken? ['What are typical curses in your mothertongue? Do you know how to curse in Dutch?']
c. Wordt er (te) veel gevloekt op de televisie en de radio? ['Is there (too) much cursing on television or radio?']
d. Wordt er tegenwoordig meer gevloekt dan vroeger? Wordt er anders gevloekt? ['Are people cursing more nowadays than they did in the past? Has the way people curse changed?']
e. Zijn er verschillen tussen de generaties? ['Are there generational differences?']
f. Wanneer kun je, volgens jou, wel vloeken en wanneer absoluut niet? ['In your opinion, when can you curse and when can you definitely not curse?] (p.95)

These questions provide important pointers for discussing specific linguistic, communicative, social and cultural features of cursing and swearing, as learners are encouraged to reflect on their use of taboo language, both in their L1 and in Dutch, on generational differences, on appropriate contexts for swearing, and on their and others' attitudes to cursing and swearing. Two journalistic texts are selected that thematise cursing and

[11] In my translations, I employ 'curse' and 'swear' interchangeably, to combine the British English and US American English use.

swearing by Dutch and Flemish speakers, exploring 'the possible merits of swearing': one from *Kennislink*, a website containing popular science news and information, and an article from the Dutch financial newspaper, *NRC Handelsblad*. The first text thematises the latest report of the *Vloekmonitor*, an organisation that monitors cursing and swearing on Dutch television. The findings of the report are highlighted, for example, that religious cursing on TV is in decline, while obscene words are on the increase, including English vulgarisms, which the text attributes to the use of Anglicisms by young speakers. A glossary of key vocabulary is provided, and learners are guided through a variety of reading comprehension and grammar exercises, followed by suggested discussion topics. Journalistic-style texts are well-suited to such adaptations, and the fact that they mediate a controversial, taboo topic such as cursing and swearing, rather than confronting learners with primary examples of the language, can help to alleviate potential anxiety and embarrassment.

4. Materials for thematising taboo language through a (socio)linguistic, pragmatic and cultural lens

The following sections of the article will take some of the ideas and approaches from the 'Shit, ik vloek!' chapter and adapt them as suggestions for how taboo language might be addressed for advanced learners of German. Five themes have been selected for their (socio)linguistic, pragmatic and cultural importance and relevance, each of which should facilitate critical reflection and discussion.

- Anglicisms in taboo language: 'Shitstorm' and 'fuck' as successful loan words.
- Historical versus contemporary taboo language: from Goethe's 'Götz-Zitat' to *Fack ju Göhte*.
- Taboo language in the public sphere: insults can be costly.
- Taboo language and politics: from *derbe Ausdrücke* ['coarse expressions'] to *Hassrede* ['hate speech'].
- Taboo language and dialect: authenticity and directness.

4.1 Anglicisms in taboo language: 'Shitstorm' and 'fuck' as successful loan words

The eye-catching and potentially shocking Anglicisms 'Shitstorm' and 'fuck' provide the opportunity for a fruitful discussion of the use of and attitudes to loan words in German in general, the use of taboo Anglicisms in everyday, political and media discourses, and differences in the pragmatic force (i.e. offensiveness) for German and

English speakers. Anglicisms in German are an object of fascination for many English-speaking learners of German, but the reactions to them are also often mixed. Some welcome the apparent advantage it offers English speakers to draw on their first language; others are concerned that if they use Anglicisms, they will be criticised for being 'lazy' by 'falling back' on English words and expressions. This is indeed a pitfall for L1 English speakers, as it is likely that in an educational setting, i.e. school or university, their use of Anglicisms will be attributed negatively to 'interference from L1', rather than to a sophisticated knowledge of latest lexical trends in the German language. Given the widespread use of Anglicisms in contemporary German, particularly by younger speakers, and the occurrence of English loanwords in a number of domains, including social media, popular culture, technology and fashion, the topic should be addressed comprehensively. As some key Anglicisms are also taboo words, such as 'shit' 'shitstorm' and 'fuck', it is important to discuss these as well, not least because their severity differs considerably among English and German speakers. Desensitisation of a taboo word through the substitution of one from another language is a common feature of taboo lexical transfers, and awareness of this phenomenon is important for language learners, especially for those whose first language is the donor language of said taboo words and expressions.

The loanword 'Shitstorm' can provide a useful case study for a discussion of lexical borrowing from English and the use of English taboo words in German. In recent years, German- and English-language media commentators have taken an interest in 'Shitstorm', which has generated a number of articles that provide stimulating discussion material for the classroom. 'Shitstorm' was voted 'Anglicism of the Year' in 2011[12], entered the *Duden* dictionary in 2013, and is now fully embedded in German vocabulary, used in the media, as well as by politicians. As is sometimes the case with Anglicisms, there are differences in meaning and context between the word in its 'original' and borrowed use. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* online, 'shitstorm' or 'shit storm' entered the English language in 1948, first attributed to the

[12] https://www.anglizismusdesjahres.de/anglizismen-des-jahres/adj-2011/. As is explained on the webpage, the competition is designed to promote the positive contribution English loanwords make to the German language, counteracting the rather negative portrayal of Anglicisms that tends to dominate in the media. Winners are decided by a combination of popular vote by the general public and a jury consisting of German-language academics with specialisms in linguistics. The competition ran between 2010 and 2021; there is no indication of winners from 2022 and 2023, so it must be assumed that it is no longer operational.

author Norman Mailer in his novel *The Naked and the Dead* ('The hell with Brown … He's been missing all the shit storms. It's his turn'). It described as 'Originally U.S. course slang', the definition being 'A frenetic or disastrous event; a commotion, a tumult' (*OED* 2024). The *Duden* online dictionary describes 'Shitstorm' (a masculine noun) as 'umgangssprachlich' ['colloquial'], offering a semantically narrower definition of the word as used in German: "Sturm der Entrüstung in einem Kommunikationsmedium des Internets, der zum Teil mit beleidigenden Äußerungen einhergeht" ['a storm of outrage in an internet medium that is in part accompanied by insulting comments'], and the example is "die Fernsehreportage über die schlechte Behandlung der Angestellten hatte einen Shitstorm ausgelöst" ['the TV report about the poor treatment of the employees caused a shitstorm']. Rather than denoting a dramatic, chaotic event or situation in general, the German 'Shitstorm' refers to a dramatic event, crisis or scandal that occurs on, or is reported or amplified by online media.

The more specific context may explain its use by media commentators and politicians, and the former German Chancellor Angela Merkel's use of it, notably in 2018 at a conference on digital communication in Nuremberg, provoked its own 'Shitstorm' among English-language media commentators in particular. In her speech, Merkel recounts how her description of the internet as 'Neuland' ['new territory'] was widely derided, remarking "Das hat mir einen großen Shitstorm bereitet" ['that caused quite a shitstorm for me']. The response among English-language journalists and commentators was dramatic, expressing shock, bewilderment and amusement, and generating considerable discussion about why she used the 'obscenity'. A report by Tara John for *CNN* online explained that this was an acceptable word in German ("Angela Merkel said "shitstorm", but it's not as bad as you think", 7.12.2018).[13] Reponses by English-language media provide interesting contextualisation for the Anglicism, and for the differences not only in use but also in attitudes to the use of such vulgarisms among English and German speakers. These responses could be used to facilitate discussion among students about their reaction to German speakers' use of 'Shitstorm'.

Two online newspaper articles by the journalist Matthias Heine: "Amerikaner und Engländer staunen über Merkels Obzönität" ['Americans and English astonished at

[13] https://edition.cnn.com/2018/12/06/europe/angela-merkel-shitstorm-scli-intl-grm/index.html.

Merkel's obscenity'] (6.12.2018),[14] and the earlier "Wie das vulgärste englische Wort ins Deutsche kam" ['How the most vulgar English word entered the German language'] (17.12.2013)[15] provide both metalinguistic commentary and potential reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition practice. The 2018 article is accompanied by a video (1.10 minutes in length) about the story and its reception by the English-language media. The video and the article provide plenty of topics for discussion, including lexical borrowing between English and German, with 'goetterdaemmerung' [sic] and 'schadenfreude' [sic] mentioned as examples of German loanwords in English, and differences in meaning between English and German loanwords. Students could reflect on linguistic-semantic processes involved in lexical borrowing, as well as on sociocultural, political factors, such as the risks taken by public and political figures in employing taboo language.

The second article from *Die Welt* mentioned above, from 2013, is also a useful, if rather lengthy, resource, as it thematises the use of 'Shitstorm' and 'fuck' in English. There are various paragraphs or passages that could be discussed, including comparisons between the English f-word and its closest literal German equivalent 'Fick', its appearance in literature, and UK-US sensibilities to its use in the media. This text could be accompanied by a discussion and viewing of selected extracts from the *Fack ju Göhte* film, as outlined in Graffe 2019, and, for background information, an article by Alexander Johnstone from the online publication *The Local Germany*, entitled "How Germans can't stop using English's filthiest words" (2016)[16], The article contains some insights into the motivations behind swearing in English, as well as three amusing examples of swear words in German, including 'Shitstorm' and Unilever's advertising campaign 'Fuck the diet'. For a more in-depth, comparative analysis of the use of the f-words in English and German, students could look at the online discussion forums in

[14] https://www.welt.de/kultur/article185120306/Shitstorm-Amerikaner-und-Englaender-staunen-ueber-Merkels-Obszoenitaet.html.

[15] https://www.welt.de/kultur/article123027544/Wie-das-vulgaerste-englische-Wort-ins-Deutsche-kam.html

[16] https://www.thelocal.de/20161117/germans-use-english-swear-words-completely-inappropriately-swearing-language, first posted on 17 November 2016 and updated on 13 July 2017. For research on English swear words in other languages, see the contributions by Beers Fägersten, Jaffe, and Zenner et al. in Fägersten and Stapleton (2017).

which participants discuss whether it is possible to use the expression 'Was zum Fick!' in German, a direct translation of 'What the fuck!' in English.[17]

4.2 Historical versus contemporary taboo language: from Goethe's 'Götz-Zitat' to *Fack ju Göhte*

To return to the 'Götz-Zitat' ['Götz quotation'], also known as the 'Schwäbischer Gruß' [the Swabian salute']: it is undeniably a key cultural and historical phenomenon; the *Fack ju Göhte* trilogy is also anchored in more recent cultural memory. Both offer insights into historical and contemporary manifestations of taboo language in theatre and film and serve to emphasise that taboo language can be part of 'high' as well as popular culture. Focusing on communicative and sociolinguistic significances, they also demonstrate how taboo utterances are used strategically to communicate features of an individual's or a collective identity. Starting with Goethe's drama, many (older) Germans will be familiar with *the* infamous phrase, although many substitute the more common preposition 'am' ['on'] rather than 'im' ['in'] in the phrase: 'Leck mich am Arsch', rather than the original 'Leck mich im Arsch[e]'.[18] In context, the choice of phrase is significant, as the character of Götz von Berlichingen represents a hero typical of literature from the *Sturm und Drang* movement, a 'rough diamond', the opposite of the sly, Machivellian nobleman. His vulgarism is a catechresis, a stylistic incongruity, a manifestation of angry, revolutionary language. A useful resource to draw on in addressing this topic is an article from 14.04.2024 on the *SWR aktuell* website, entitled "Goethes Ritterdrama 'Götz von Berlichingen' feiert 250-jähriges Jubiläum" ['Goethe's historical drama 'Götz von Berlichingen' celebrates its 250-year anniversary']. *SWR* or *Südwestrundfunk* ['South West Radio'] is the regional broadcasting company for South Western Germany. Above the headline is the byline '"Er könne mich im Arsche lecken" bis heute bekannt' ['"He can kiss my arse" is famous to this day'], which

[17] See, for example, the discussion thread on *reddit* from 2021, initiated by the question Can you say in German "Fick dich" as in "fuck you"? (https://www.reddit.com/r/German/comments/nx73wi/can_you_say_in_german_fick_dich_as_in_fuck_you/).

[18] The British English translation 'Kiss my arse' (US English: 'Kiss my ass') for both versions does not represent the difference in meaning – and potentially level of offensiveness – conveyed in German. In addition to the more graphic literal translation of the verb 'lecken' as 'lick' rather than 'kiss', the preposition 'Leck mich *am* Arsch', ('lick me *on* the arse') is less severe than 'Leck mich *im* Arsch' ('lick me *in* the arse'), which is undoubtedly more offensive.

focuses attention on the most famous vulgarism in German literature. Students could be asked if there is an equivalent example from the language(s) that they speak. English speakers could point to Shakespeare and the many well-known insults and vulgarisms in his plays. The second (brief) paragraph mentions the famous phrase and how some productions attempt to downplay its effect by having the actor mumble the words. This reluctance to articulate the words is, according to the article, in stark contrast to its status as a 'classic' local greeting in the region. The article is accompanied by a short audio recording (34 seconds in total) of residents of Berlichingen talking about the famous fictional character and his connection to the town. The local accents of the speakers provide a good opportunity to explore regional variation, as well as their reflections on the play and its famous phrase.[20]

Moving on to contemporary language, much of the innovation in swear words and insults hails from youth language; therefore, materials that come from or thematise young people's informal interactions provide a rich source for discussion and elucidation. Films such as *Fack ju Göhte*, as highlighted above, although fictional, can offer some insights into the use of taboo language by younger speakers, which is different from the kind of language employed by older speakers, or those in the public eye. As with youth language in general, swear words and insults created and employed by young speakers are influenced by social media and popular culture trends, and tend to be of short currency. Some of the swear words make the transition into more general use, and uptake by the older generation is usually a sure sign that a swear word is out of fashion. Many youth swear words, however, fade quickly into obscurity. A current useful and entertaining resource for youth taboo language is the online quiz generated by researchers from the Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg, as part of a wider project on *Schimpfwörter*, which examines historical and contemporary swear words, their forms and their functions.[21] The quiz consists of a list of fifteen youth swear words

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[19] https://www.swr.de/swraktuell/baden-wuerttemberg/heilbronn/goetz-von-berlichingen-feiert-250-jaehriges-jubilaeum-102.html.

[20] For further historical-cultural context, students could be pointed to Mozart's 'Leck mich im Arsch', a Canon in B flat, composed for six voices.

[21] The website contains a wealth of information about historical swearing dictionaries as well as addressing youth swearing. There is a useful video about the project, focusing on an exhibition that showcased the project to the public in Halle, entitled 'Spotten – Schmähen – Schelten' ['Mock – Defame – Curse'] that ran from 28 October 2022 to 31 March 2023, and featuring the project's leader, Dr Andrea Seidel https://youtu.be/lMWuwjUlxDA?si=dSf_i2PMbHKheXNN.

on the right-hand-side of the screen that participants must click on, drag and drop to match the correct definition. The fifteen words are: 'Pussy', 'Lauch' ['lanky twat'|, 'Geringverdiener' [lit. 'low wage earner' = 'loser'], 'Alman' ['typical German'], 'Huan' ['son of a bitch'], 'Warmduscher' [lit. someone who showers with hot water' = 'wimp'], '31er' ['snitch' or 'grass'], 'Xhantippe' ['nag'], 'Pico' ['bastard'], 'AMK' [lit. I'll fuck you' = 'I'll end you], 'Opfer' [lit. 'victim' = 'loser'], 'Simp' ['sucker'], 'Kek' ['loser'], 'Snitch', 'Zonk' ['loser']. My own experience of using this quiz with both ab initio and post-A level students is that it works well. I start by telling students that when I first attempted the quiz, I scored eight out of fifteen – not a complete failure for someone well beyond youth – but also not impressive. My lack of success, however, is a good starting point in giving them confidence, and this is also enhanced by the likely familiarity of some of the words to English speakers because of the use of Anglicisms ('Pussy') and expressions from gaming ('Simp' and 'Snitch'). Participants can click on the 'i' icon to receive a clue before making their choices. This is an activity that students can undertake in pairs or small groups.

There are linguistic and sociocultural features that can be discussed, including clipped or abbreviated words ('Huan' as a contraction of 'Hurensohn'), or the use of initialisms ('AMK' from the Turkish 'Amina Koyim'). Cultural references are also significant, including the classical etymology of 'Xhantippe', and 'Kek' coming from the World of Warcraft gaming community, prior to it being adopted as an insult by rap artists. The legal provenance of '31er' also provides a talking point; as explained on the webpage, it is a reference to Paragraph 31 of the law on intoxicating substances. A defendant who agrees to testify against another defendant or to supply useful information for a criminal investigation can be offered a lighter sentence. In negative terms, such a person is a 'snitch'; this then undergoes semantic widening to apply to anyone who betrays someone in their social group. Students could be asked to group the insults, as there are recognisable clusters, for example, someone who is labelled weak or ineffectual, or who betrays friends. It is also important to highlight other features, for example, multi-lingualism – the significance of English and Turkish expressions – misogyny (the stereotypical 'nagging' woman), and the fact that not all the insults employ taboo expressions, for example 'Warmduscher'. There is also an opportunity for students to reflect on their own language use and that of their peer groups: the kinds of insults that are used and their functions, i.e., if they are used for bonding purposes, in the form of

ritualised insults, demonstrating intra-group familiarity and intimacy, or if they are used for face-threatening purposes.

4.3 Taboo language in the public sphere: insults can be costly

Taboo language in the public sphere is a key theme that has emerged in this analysis so far, with the example of politicians using vulgarisms in their speech. In this sub-section, however, the focus is less on the specific variety used by a clearly defined social group, but rather on the setting of public communication. Learners' understanding of the pragmatic force of a taboo utterance can be enhanced by exploring the broader communicative context of public speech and the impact of linguistic impoliteness on typical everyday interactions. This covers a potentially wide range of discourse types and interactions; therefore, some specific instances will be highlighted for use in language learning. An initial starting point could be a discussion of fines for swearing in public, for example, in traffic, at a fellow member of the public or an official (police officer, parking attendant). Swearing or insults directed at another (in public) come under Paragraph 185 of the *Strafgesetzbuch* ['Criminal Code'], and is generally known as the 'Beleidigungsgesetz' [lit. 'insult law'], which would equate to Section 5 of the Public Order Act in the UK that penalises 'threatening or abusive words or behaviour, or disorderly behaviour' (legislation.gov.uk). Censure for using offensive language in public is not unique to Germany; however, what is culturally significant is the attention paid to attaching fines to specific expressions. There are a number of webpages that discuss the financial punishments for particular insults, for example, the online *Bußgeldkatalog* ['Catalogue of fines'] for insulting someone in traffic.[22] Examples could be selected from the list, such as 'Du blödes Schwein' (EURO 475), 'Leck mich doch' (EURO 300), 'Du Wichser' (EURO 1000), 'Schlampe' (EURO 1900), 'Alte Sau' (EURO 2500). The level of the fine points to the severity of the insult, with some potentially interesting nuances for the LX speaker: why is 'alte Sau' [lit. 'old sow'] considered emphatically more insulting than 'blödes Schwein' [lit. 'stupid pig'], even though they refer to the same animal? Is it because 'Sau' refers to a 'sow', and if so, why is the female nomenclature more offensive? Misogynistic slurs are included in the list and score highly on the severity level, with 'Schlampe' ['slut'] and 'fieses Miststück' ['evil bitch'] incurring fines of EURO 1900 and 2500 respectively, compared with 'dumme Kuh' ['stupid cow'] by contrast considered a milder insult

[22] https://www.bussgeldkatalog.org/beleidigung-im-strassenverkehr/. The webpage was last updated on 26 April 2024.

(EURO 400). Gendered insults are a potentially rich and pertinent discussion, being part of a wider manifestation of linguistic, communicative violence, in which women are demeaned, sexualised and silenced (Mills 2008). Such a resource can therefore be used as starting point for discussions about interlingual similarities and differences in swearing and insulting, lexical fields for these insults (noting also that not all insults listed on the webpage are taboo expressions), and sociocultural issues, including sexism and misogyny.

4.4 Taboo language and politics: from *derbe Ausdrücke* ['coarse expressions'] to *Hassrede* ['hate speech']

Political discourse, in the form of speeches, interviews, and parliamentary debates, tends to be planned, highly structured, even ritualistic (Horan 2013), seemingly far from the spontaneous, emotional, or intimate forms of speech associated with taboo language. For politicians, using taboo language is a risky undertaking, potentially provoking censure and rejection (Horan 2011; see also Jay 2000: 163). Questions arise about the appropriateness of swearing in the political sphere: do politicians swear, and what happens if and when they do? What constitutes 'unparliamentary' language, and is it ever warranted? There are instances of politicians employing taboo language, as Angela Merkel's use of 'Shitstorm' demonstrates, although this is arguably not a salient example, given that it was only considered shocking by the English-language media. When German speakers are asked to name an example of a politician using taboo language, then, particularly if they are older than 50 or 60, it is likely that they will mention German Green Party politician Joschka Fischer (also Foreign Minister 1998-2005). On 18 October 1984 Fischer addressed Richard Stücklen, President of the German Lower House of Parliament with the words 'Mit Verlaub, Herr Präsident, Sie sind ein Arschloch!' ['With respect, Mr President, you are an asshole!']. Fischer was ejected from parliament, and his utterance was not recorded in the transcript from that session, which may explain why some sources also report him as saying 'Herr Präsident, mit Verlaub, Sie sind ein Arschloch!' (Horan 2011: 24; Pursch 1992: 21-22). Responses to Fischer's vulgarism, in its rather incongruous combination with the polite form of address, ranged from positive to negative. Some commentators praised his outspokenness and directness, while others criticised his outburst as being a sign of immaturity and as evidence that he was not fit to be in parliament (Horan 2011: 23-24). Although a brief example of taboo language in the political sphere, Fischer's utterance could be

addressed in discussions about expectations of language use in formal speech, as well as ritualistic forms of politeness in parliamentary settings.

Taboo language in politics concerns not only how politicians speak, but also how they are addressed in wider political discourse. In discussing the importance of context and appropriateness of using taboo language in the public sphere, the question of online linguistic aggression and hate speech must be addressed. Not all criticism of politicians is aggressive or constitutes hate speech, and not all manifestations of linguistic aggression involve taboo language, but there is notable overlap. One case in point is the abuse Green Party politician Renate Künast received. In 2022, Künast won a court case concerning five Facebook posts that had used extremely offensive language about her, including the expressions 'Stück Scheiße' ['piece of shit'], 'altes Grünes Drecksschwein' ['dirty old Green pig'], and 'Drecksfotze' ['fucking c*nt']. The original decision of the *Berliner Landesgericht* ['Berlin Regional Court'] from 2019 that Künast sought to overturn had ruled that the insults were an unpleasant phenomenon that politicians simply had to endure. Although Künast's court victory did not result in any prosecutions, it is nonetheless considered a landmark case, as it acknowledged the negative impact of such insults on the individual politician, and their unacceptability in the public, online sphere. There are a number of online media reports that advanced learners could read and discuss; two examples will be discussed here: "Künast setzt sich in Hassposts durch" ['Künast wins her battle against hate posts'] by Wolfgang Janisch, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (02.02.2022), and "Renate Künast muss Hasskommentare nicht hinnehmen" ['Renate Künast does not have to tolerate hate commentaries'] (no author cited), *Deutsche Welle* (2.2.2022).[23] The headlines and the reports provide material for discussion about the framing of the story, as well as about the nature (and severity) of the insults themselves. Wider discussions could consider the limits of free speech, definitions of hate speech, and the dangers of online anonymity in facilitating such extreme linguistic violence. The problems of heightened abuse that women politicians and politicians whose parents or grandparents were immigrants tend to suffer, as well as the phenomenon of far-right online abuse, are also current topics that merit discussion in

[23] https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/hass-und-hetze-renate-kuenast-bundesverfassungsgericht-facebook-1.5520400 and https://www.dw.com/de/bundesverfassungsgericht-renate-k%C3%BCnast-muss-hasskommentare-nicht-hinnehmen/a-60631840.

the advanced language classroom.[24] As most language learners are now users of online and social media, it is essential that, as part of their target-language communicative competence, they become familiar with the communicative conventions of online discourse in that language. It is worth considering, for example, to what extent anonymity and the asychronicity of social media communication lowers social inhibitions, subverting the usual 'censorship practices', including self-censorship that typically govern L1 speakers' interaction and by which "taboo is maintained and potentially strengthened" (Beers-Fägertson and Stapleton 2024: 1).

4.5 Taboo language in dialect: authenticity and directness

There is a wealth of resources on swearing in dialect in German, in the form of dialect *Schimpfwörterbücher* ['swearing dictionaries'] and online videos that both thematise and provide examples of taboo language in various dialects (see also Horan 2011). For advanced learners, exploring taboo language in one or more dialects provides the opportunity to discover what regional varieties look and sound like, as this can be markedly absent from learning German in a formal classroom setting. It also offers invaluable sociolinguistic insights into the relationship between regional and standard varieties. Materials that make use of or engage with taboo language in dialect could prompt sociolinguistic discussions about, for example, why speakers gravitate towards swearing in dialect, or the role of dialect swearing in sociolinguistic identity, i.e. speakers' 'pride' in regional swear words. From here, learners could reflect on differences between the standard and the vernacular, with possible tensions between the perceived authenticity of the vernacular versus the artifice and artificiality of the standard. In some respects, the question of why speakers swear in dialect is akin to that posed of multilingual speakers, with the tendency of such speakers to favour their L1 in emotional speech (including taboo utterances) (Dewaele 2017).

[24] A similar, more recent example is of another Green Party politician, Cem Özdemir, current Minister for Food, Agriculture and Forestry. In a below-the-line comment on a video Özdemir had posted on Facebook, the defendant had described Özdemir as a 'Drecksack' ['scumbag' or 'rotten bastard']. Özdemir took the Facebook poster to court, and the regional court in Koblenz found in his favour, characterizing the insult as defamatory and as violating his personality rights, and fining the defendant EURO600. See for example the report "Özdemir bekommt nach Pöbelei Schmerzensgeld", *Zdf heute*, 9.7.2024, (no author cited), https://www.zdf.de/nachrichten/politik/deutschland/oezdemir-schmerzensgeld-beleidigung-urteil-koblenz-100.html.

Similarly, because dialects, certainly in Germany and Austria, are largely spoken varieties (although this is changing due to social media), and are deemed appropriate in informal, casual domains, speakers will often choose to swear in dialect or in a regionalism, because this is an expression of their 'authentic self' in a relaxed, informal social environment. Closely linked to this perception of authenticity is the association of dialect with 'plain speaking', of telling uncomfortable truths that cannot be expressed in standard German. In the foreword to *Das Märkische Schimpfwörterbuch* ['The Mark Brandenburg Swearing Dictionary'], for example, Volker Schielke expresses the popular sentiment that 'Mundart, sagt man, sei die schlichte Sprache der Völker: reich an gefühlsbetonten und direkten Ausdrücken' ['Dialect, so it is said, is the plain language of the people, rich in emotion-laden and direct expressions'] (1992: 8). In a similar vein, the author of *Das Kölsche Schimpfwörterbuch* ['The Cologne Dialect Swearing Dictionary], Volker Gröbe, explains that the Kölsch speaker, having fired their 'Schimpfwortsalve' ['swearing salvo'] or even 'Schimpfwortkanone' ['swearing canon'], bears no ill-will towards the object of their swearing tirade, as the dialect allows them to speak directly and without malice: "Dat moot ens jesaht wäde. No es et jot. Jetz künne mer widder e Kölsch zesamme drinke". [That just had to be said. It's all good now, and we can drink a Kölsch together again'] (Gröbe 2001: 7).

Although dialect creates a communicative 'zone of acceptability' for emotional speech and taboo utterances, it is only possible precisely because of its marginal status, outside the boundaries of formal, standard language. This entails that it tends to be taken less seriously and is even regarded as amusing (Horan 2011: 18-19). For the classroom, any dialect that has an online presence can be discussed; taking the Viennese dialect as a case in point: the video 'Schimpfen auf Wienerisch' by the Universität Wien, from September 2016, available on YouTube offers a concise overview of the sociolinguistic, pragmatic functions of swearing, featuring the research of the linguist Oksana Havryliv.[25] Havryliv outlines the close link between dialect and swearing, namely, that speakers tend to swear in dialect rather than in the standard language. She touches on the main characteristics of dialect swearing, namely, the sense of familiarity associated with the dialect, and its suitability as a 'Transportmittel' ['means of transport'] for expressing emotions. The particularities of Viennese swear words are also highlighted, including the lexical influences from geographically proximate languages, and their

[25] https://youtu.be/FiFnXLZTzro?si=k2MZ3Ocsntv9qk2e.

influence, particularly on younger speakers. The video therefore addresses broader sociolinguistic themes, including language contact, social class-based, gender and generational differences in language use.

The below-the-line comments also provide a snapshot of speakers' attitudes to dialect and to swearing, with some commentators expressing their love of Viennese and other Austrian and German dialects, some switching between standard German and dialect, and including snippets of their own language biographies. For example, one commenter, describing themselves as a 'Berliner', compares Viennese 'slang' and speakers favourably to the Berlin equivalents: "Ich bin Berliner und der Wiener Slang hört sich ganz gut an für mich. Wenn das ‚Berlinerische' der Pöbel ist, Gosse, Unterschicht, ist das Wienerische der Adel, feine Leute" ['I come from Berlin, and the Viennese slang sounds good to me; I like it. If the Berlin dialect represents riffraff, the gutter, plebs, then Viennese represents aristocracy, posh people']. This resource offers a metalinguistic account of swearing; a useful companion video would therefore be a video on swearing in Viennese by the rapper A.geh, "Wienerisch mit A.geh Wirklich? – Folge 4: Schimpfen" (15.12.2015).[26] One of a series of videos about the dialect, this short video (2 minutes, 50 seconds) provides an entertaining insight into a variety of Viennese swear words used in specific contexts. A specific example is 'Schastrommel' [lit. 'farting drum'; British English, '(gossipy) old bag'], a derogatory insult aimed predominantly at women considered to be old and unattractive, and who spread gossip.[27] The ideas contained in the videos and the accompanying comments could form the basis of classroom discussion about learners' own use of swearing dialectisms or regionalisms, reflections on specific regional, age-related or gendered characteristics, harmful cultural stereotypes, as well as interlingual differences and more general attitudes to regional varieties and styles of speech.

5. Thematising taboo language in German language learning: closing thoughts

Focusing on selected themes and media, this article has highlighted the communicative, sociolinguistic and cultural significance of taboo language in German, arguing that it

[26] https://youtu.be/nzveYT_noCA?si=JGPhxcjGcHRyLZ0N.

[27] See the definition of 'Schastrommel' from the Universität Graz's project, 'Deutsche WortSchätze', 2022 (https://wortschaetze.uni-graz.at/de/wortschaetze/wortschaetze-nach-themen/belegdatenbank-musik/s/schastrommel/).

can contribute to a more sophisticated, nuanced understanding of the language. In the context of UK Higher Education, language learners are expected to attain a high level of competence in their target language(s) by the end of their four-year modern language(s) degree, and this should involve access to as extensive a range of styles and registers as possible. Thematising taboo language with this group of learners (adults and with an advanced language level) is, of course, an easier task than with younger and less advanced learners. Nonetheless, some of the materials and activities could perhaps be amended for different types of learner. The expression 'thematise', used throughout the article, although vague, is chosen deliberately, as it offers possibilities to discuss and explore taboo language, whether directly, using material containing taboo language or, on a metalinguistic level, with resources that themselves thematise the language. To what extent this is foregrounded, or whether it is part of a broader discussion about varieties of German, is a matter for the individual teacher to decide. Taboo language is part of informal language, emotional speech, identity formation, political and media discourse, youth language, and regional variation, and it is embedded into German-language culture, politics and history. As such, the plea to thematise taboo language in its various manifestations is part of an important, wider move towards addressing the sociolinguistic, cultural as well as communicative complexity of the German language in all its varieties.

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