

Some Words Defy Translation. Angela Merkel Showed Why.

[Video](#)

[German Chancellor Angela Merkel deployed a word English speakers might use to describe chaos or outrage during a speech at a technology conference.](#)

By Melissa Eddy

• Dec. 5, 2018

BERLIN — Some words can't be translated easily. But they can cross national borders, lose their original context along the journey, assume different meanings and crop up in unlikely places.

This week, Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany proved that point — memorably.

Speaking at a technology conference on Tuesday, Ms. Merkel, known as a staid, no-drama politician, told a self-deprecating anecdote about being widely mocked online five years ago after she described the internet as some mysterious expanse of “uncharted territory.”

She chuckled at the memory of the digital blowback.

“It generated quite a shitstorm,” [she said](#), using the English term — because Germans, it turns out, do not have one of their own.

That, as you might imagine, stirred yet another online reaction, at least among many English speakers in Britain and the United States.

“I can die happy now that Merkel has used the word,” Anne McElvoy, a senior editor with The Economist, [wrote on Twitter](#).

The writer David Simon wondered why the Germans had not devised their own term. “These guys have a word for everything,” he said on Twitter.

Ms. Merkel is in the twilight of her political career, with her successor as leader of the German conservatives expected to be named on Friday. It would be tempting to interpret her word choice as a devil-may-care gesture from a politician suddenly unconcerned with appearances.

But, no. Ms. Merkel has actually used the word a number of other times in public. As do many other Germans.

It was adopted into the country's standard dictionary, [Duden](#), in 2013. The listing defining the word, which is capitalized in the German, noted that it originated from the English. But its meaning in German is a little more specific: It denotes a “storm of outrage” on the internet, such as blowback generated over social media.

Ms. Merkel is cited as having [first used the word in 2012](#) in a town-hall meeting in Heidelberg, and some credit that for contributing to its acceptance among German speakers.

Most Germans remain unaware that in English, the word is considered a vulgarity, and its use is not limited to internet outrage.

Michael Steen, the head of media relations for the European Central Bank, wrote on Twitter that he had been 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.



[Michael Steen](#) ✓ @michaelsteen

I've been explaining to German colleagues echoing Merkel's regular-ish use for at least five years that is isn't really ok in English. <https://www.google.co.uk/amp/s/amp.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2013/jul/04/shitstorm-german-dictionary-duden-shitschturm> ...

Lionel Barber

✓@lionalbarber

First noted use by a German chancellor of “shitstorm”. German scholars will also appreciate the use of “einen Shitstorm einbringen” rather than the more poetic verb “hervorzaubern” or the more prosaic “Shitstorm anstossen”
<https://twitter.com/RegSprecher/status/1069982705058758656> ...

31

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The word’s casual use in German is interesting to linguists, given its somewhat taboo nature in English, said Anatol Stefanowitsch, a professor of English linguistics at the Free University in Berlin. But taking such a word out of its original context shifts — and softens — its meaning, he said, making its use acceptable in the new language.

“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.”

Exactly how the term came to find a home in Germany remains a matter of debate. Some credit the author John Irving for its introduction. He used the word in 2006 to describe the outcry in the German news media after the Nobel laureate [Günter Grass](#) revealed that he had been a member of the Waffen-SS during World War II.

Linguists see a more likely scenario. German speakers, they suggest, saw it being deployed online in English in the context of social media outcry and simply adopted it. A few Germans tried to coin phrases to explain the internet phenomenon, but none caught on. “This one stuck around,” Mr. Stefanowitsch said.

Modern English has benefited greatly from countless German words that have made their way into daily use, including “angst,” “zeitgeist” and “über,” each with slight variations on their original meaning.

As one English speaker noted on Twitter, the imported word could be seen as a thank you to the German language. “A sign of gratitude,” [he wrote](#), “for ‘schadenfreude.’”

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