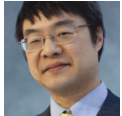# Germans are falling for the same trap as the Japanese: Importing words from English and changing the meaning, but the Germans do it even though the words didn't need to be imported at all

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Languages borrow from each other all the time. English has historically been a happy perpetrator of word-theft, but in recent decades, it has been serving as the source for a lot of theft, too. What I find particularly interesting, though, is when a word is borrowed and given a meaning in its new language different from its meaning in the source language. Japanese is famous for this, For example, they take the English phrase *white shirt* and import it as *waishatsu*, which means not *white shirt* but *dress shirt*. In Swedish, the phenomenon of importing English into Swedish is known as *svengelska*, a blend of *svenska* and *engelska*. The Swedes use the faux-English term service-mind to mean *dedication to customer service*. I find this interesting because they just took some English words and combined them in a way not used in English at all. And as you can see from the citation, it seems that there are some who are under the mistaken impression that we use the word in English, too. One thing that disturbs me is when a word is imported into a language even though there is already a perfectly good word for the concept. Many years ago, my aunt (who at the time was a Japanese teacher) went to Japan and sat down in a restaurant. She looked over the menu looking for the beverages and couldn't find it. She asked the waiter where the beverage section was, and the waiter directed her to the section titled *dorinku*. The Japanese have imported the word *dorinku* from the English word *drink*, displacing the traditional Japanese word (which I believe is *nomimono*, but I could be wrong). My aunt was looking for the traditional Japanese word and couldn't find it. The award, however, for using faux English terms, goes to the Germans and *Denglisch*, the term for the blending of *Deutsch* and *Englisch*. Unsatisfied with the perfectly good German word *Rucksack*, which means *backpack*, some marketing geniuses decided to adopted the English word *body bag* instead. This is wrong on so many levels. First of all, it's the phenomenon of replacing a perfectly good native word with a loanword. Second, the English language *imported the word rucksack from German*. We borrowed the word *from you*. Feel free to borrow it back; it was yours originally! And third, the import is disturbingly incorrect. In English, a *body bag* is a bag for carrying corpses, what in German would be called a *Leichensack*. This is a rather long

and tedious set-up for my recent discovery. Apparently in Switzerland, the term for a light truck—not a semi-trailer but something that a family might own—is a *Pickup*, even though in English, the term *pick-up* is used only for a particular type of small truck.

Mind you, the English language is hardly innocent in the matter of importing a word while changing its meaning. For example, the prefix *über-* (or simply *uber-*) is <u>used in English to mean *ultimate* or *super*</u>. As a random example, I produce <u>this citation for the word *ubermom*</u>. Of course, this prefix is nonsensical to native speakers of German, since *über* merely means *over* or *on top of*. The German word *Übermensch*, was originally translated into English as *superman*, leading to the widespread misconception that *Über* must mean *super*.

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