Lowkey, I Think He's Cringe:

A morphological examination of the lexeme "cringe" in online communication by German and English-speaking youth

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Increasingly, English slang words, such as "cringe," are being adopted by German teens, mainly due to language contact through the internet and social media. In English, the formation of slang involves changing and adapting the original meaning of a word into a new context. "Cringe" is an example of a verb being converted into an adjective in English slang through zero-derivation. However, when loanwords like "cringe" are adopted into German, does the original slang meaning and usage from English transfer to the new language? While past studies have explored the influence of various media inputs, like films or music, on the adoption of English slang into German, there are few studies on the effects of the internet. Moreover, research on English loanwords in German typically focuses on either meaning or structural transfer (Munske 1980; Lehnert 1990; Busse 2001) but "cringe" presents a unique case where both meaning and structure play crucial roles in its slang usage. This case study examines the word class usage of "cringe" in a slang context, using text samples collected from TikTok comments written in English or German. Contrary to the original conversion in English, the lexeme "cringe" was mostly used as a noun by English speakers. In contrast, German speakers mostly used it as an adjective, but the word was used in more word classes in the German samples than in the English ones. These findings suggest that "cringe" has become more integrated into German morphological patterns than previously assumed. "Cringe" might even be so assimilated that it is taking on a semantic and morphological life of its own, potentially independent of its English origin.

(270 words)

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