



# Seen and not heard: The relationship of orthography, morphology, and phonology in loanword adaptation in the German hip hop community



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## ABSTRACT

In this study, a particular development in language behavior, the use of the *-ed* suffix from English in both participle and non-participle contexts, is investigated in the domain of the German hip hop community. This morphological-orthographic feature is analyzed from a linguistic and distributional standpoint in a 12.5 million word corpus of German hip hop discussion, revealing its patterns of use over a decade in both contexts within this community, along with supplemental examples from YouTube videos. This corpus analysis is paired with a case study of a discourse event between two forum participants negotiating the use of this form, revealing a surprising streak of linguistic conservatism in the German hip hop community as well as the contested nature of the form's usage. The results of this study demonstrate the need for closer attention to morphological forms in sociolinguistic studies of computer-mediated communication, as such forms can reveal linguistic behavior that would not be evident in spoken language, but which are nevertheless contested and negotiated as linguistic features.

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## 1. Introduction

As part of what [Androutsopoulos \(2006: 420\)](#) describes as a “first wave” of research on computer-mediated communication, much was made of the “hybrid combination of written and spoken features” characteristic of online linguistic forms and orthography—this type of analysis being represented in, e.g., [Crystal \(2001\)](#). More recent analyses ([Herring, 2004](#); [Androutsopoulos, 2006](#)) have taken a critical view of these early investigations, calling for a nuanced, situated, and less-superficial approach to language use online, and the result of these efforts is visible in the last decade of scholarship in the paradigm of computer-mediated discourse analysis (CMDA), a program of research laid out in [Herring \(2004\)](#) and exemplified in [Androutsopoulos and Beißwenger \(2008\)](#). These discourse-centered approaches are of great use in constructing a more complete and accurate picture of online communication, and I suggest that the considered study of lexical items and their linguistic features (understood here as inclusive of orthography) in online environments is a crucial part of the analysis of discourse. Discourse analysis of computer-mediated communication should include the careful quantitative and qualitative analysis of linguistic and orthographic features, a theme taken up by several authors in [Jaffe et al. \(2012\)](#). In this study, I demonstrate the utility of this approach by examining the case of English borrowings in German. These loanwords' various morphological, phonological, and

orthographic features are the primary source of popular perceptions of these loans as *fremd*, or ‘foreign’, and for this reason, the study of these lexical items, their linguistic features, and their social utility is of great interest to the sociolinguistics of orthography.

The data I use in this study constitute instances of the orthographic nativization of English loanwords in the German-language hip hop community as represented by a large corpus of Internet forum discussions. This dataset was chosen for several reasons. First, German-language data were chosen because of recent public debates regarding perceptions of English influence on the German language, a kind of concern about language which is not entirely unique to Germany, but which has a very long historical, political, and cultural context in the German-speaking sphere ([Spitzmüller, 2007](#)). Second, an analysis of language in German hip hop culture relates to ongoing research on the emergence of global hip hop, which has been a recent subject of interest in sociolinguistics and related fields (see, e.g., recent volumes from [Pennycook \(2007\)](#); [Alim and Samy \(2009\)](#); [Terkourafi \(2010\)](#)). In addition, [Alim \(2004: 388\)](#) has noted the centrality of linguistic behavior to the practice of hip hop (in the form of rapping, one of hip hop's traditional ‘four elements’), a placement which makes hip hop an ideal ground for the study of linguistic transfer. However, linguistic analysis of rap lyrics poses a conundrum to the researcher: rap lyrics are often carefully composed, edited, and rehearsed; and while extemporaneous compositions exist (a type of rapping known as ‘freestyling’), the demands of meter, rhyme, and other concerns of a codified musical genre distance rap lyrics from the more prototypical forms of natural language production. In selecting data for analysis, then, I examine

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everyday language use among German hip hop fans and artists, focusing on the interaction of English and German in the adaptation of loanwords in a 12.5 million word corpus of German-language Internet discussions centered on hip hop. I collected this corpus (hereafter *the MZEE corpus*) from the forums at <http://www.MZEE.com>, a popular German-language Internet hip hop portal. Discussions included in the corpus span the time period from roughly March 2000 to March 2011.

The primary research questions addressed here are (1) what forms do English-to-German borrowings take in the hip hop community, i.e., how are these borrowings nativized or adapted, and (2) how do community members use and react to these forms? The results of this study stand not only to enrich our understanding of the borrowing process, but also to address the extent to which English borrowings are (or are not) integrated into the German language. This in turn speaks of the sociopolitical question of language decline or decay raised in, e.g., Greiner (2010) in an article in the national newspaper *Die Zeit*, entitled *Ist Deutsch noch zu retten?* featuring the tagline *Englisch ist die Weltsprache. Aber wir können verhindern, dass unsere Muttersprache weiter erodiert*, “Can German still be saved? English is the world language. But we can prevent the further erosion of our mother tongue.”

## 2. The problem

The focus of the present study is a particular orthographic-morphological form borrowed along with English verbs, namely the past participle/past-tense suffix *-(ed)*.<sup>1</sup> This suffix is *formally salient*, to use Onysko's (2007: 90) terminology in classifying borrowings; in other words, this suffix is visibly foreign to the German reader. In several ways I will discuss throughout this paper, this form exemplifies the interaction of orthography with morphophonology, an interaction which has been discussed only rarely in previous literature. Androutsopoulos' (2000) examination of stylization and orthography in punk fanzines, for example, examines in depth the social and stylistic significance of variants like ⟨z⟩ for ⟨s⟩, demonstrating that these orthographic stylizations index subcultural meanings, but touches on cross-linguistic influence only in passing. In the remainder of this section, I will introduce the specific inflectional forms discussed in this paper and previous work on the nativization of borrowings in German to provide a background for the subsequent analysis.

### 2.1. Verb tenses and inflectional affixes in English and German

The English and German verbal inflectional systems, being related, share certain features. In each there is a preterit or simple past tense indicated by a past affix (in English *-ed* and in German *-t*, but note that an additional affix for person/number, e.g. *-e* for third-person singular, necessarily follows the German preterit affix). Likewise, both systems share a present perfect tense formed by the combination of an auxiliary verb—in English an inflected form of *to have*, in German an inflected form of *haben* or *sein*—with a past participle form of the main verb. In English, this past participle is formed for regular verbs with *-ed* (and is thus identical to the simple past), but in German, the past participle for regular verbs is formed with the circumfix *ge- ... -t*. The situation for regular (weak) verbs is compared in Table 1.

Two additional inflectional forms are noted in Table 2, as they will play a role later in the analysis. The German third-person

**Table 1**

English and German inflectional forms: infinitive, past, and past participle.

Morphological form (person/number/tense shown)	English	German
Infinitive	<i>to chew</i>	<i>kau-en</i>
Past (third-person singular, preterit/simple past)	<i>he chew-ed</i>	<i>er kau-t-e</i>
Past participle (present perfect)	<i>he has chew-ed</i>	<i>er hat ge-kau-t</i>

**Table 2**

Additional inflectional forms.

Morphological form (person/number/tense shown)	English	German
(Third-person singular present)	<i>he chew-s</i>	<i>er kau-t</i>
Imperative (pl. only)	<i>(you) chew!</i>	<i>kau-t (euch)!</i>

singular present and plural imperative forms are both formed for regular weak verbs by adding the suffix *-t*.

There is a regular exception to the rule for past participle formation in German, as articulated by Fagan (2009: 89): “If a verb begins with an unstressed syllable, the *ge-* portion of the circumfix is dropped. This holds for verbs in all classes.” As an example, she provides *stu'dieren* (to study), the past participle of which is *stu'diert* ‘studied’. Note that this form is then identical for such verbs to the third-person singular present and plural imperative forms. Hence, the situation as relevant to the present analysis is that German past participle form is produced with *ge- ... -t* or simply *-t* in some cases, which is very much analogous to the English past participle (and simple past) suffix *-ed*, which is variably produced as [d] or [t], depending on its environment (the German form is, being word final, always [t]). The *-t* suffix is also used in German for two other inflections: the third-person present singular and the plural imperative.

### 2.2. Inflection and nativization in borrowings

Several authors have remarked on the variable morphophonological integration or adaptation of loanwords (see, e.g., Haugen, 1950; Poplack et al., 1988; Hock, 1991), but Eisenberg (2004: 128–130) has produced the only in-depth observational analysis of English borrowings in German to my knowledge. Eisenberg examines, among other types, borrowed adjectives, which take (English) participle forms. He lists *relaxed*, *recycled*, *gelabelled*, *gepuzzled*, and *airconditioned*—these participle adjectives are the only borrowings mentioned in his analysis that include *-ed* forms (129). In terms of verbs, Eisenberg finds that these, in general, readily integrate with German syntax and morphology in a predictably structured fashion, using examples like *Er hat gedealt* ‘he had dealt [drugs]’ and *Sie ist [...] gejoggt* ‘she [...] jogged’. Indeed, examinations of anglicisms in the MZEE corpus used for the present study reveal that straightforward integration seems to be the norm for the most common forms, like *rappen*, ‘to rap’, *gedisst*, ‘dissed’, *deepe*, ‘deep’. The use of the *-(ed)* suffix, however, is also found, and by contrast, does not superficially align with the straightforward application of German morphophonological rules. Hence, this form could be considered a problematic exception to the notion that the nativization or adaptations of English borrowings is in every case a simple process.

## 3. Linguistic analysis: the participle (and non-participle) *-ed* suffix

The primary argument set forth in this paper is that while an orthographic *-(ed)* form is established as a lower-frequency

<sup>1</sup> In this article, I will use the convention of angular brackets ⟨ ⟩ to indicate an orthographic form, square brackets [ ] to indicate a phonetic form (using IPA notation) and italic script to indicate a wordform or suffix in a general sense (incl. orthography, morphology, and pronunciation).

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