

True German and phony English laughter: Schmidt-Hidding was still Schmidt

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Abstract

Schmidt-Hidding's (b. 1903, d. 1967) lexical field study on the area of Humor und Witz [humour and wit/jokes] (1963b) receives attention in humour research to this day, especially in German-speaking countries. His diamond-shaped illustration of the two dimensions of the field of humour, not least in its aim to distinguish "earthy" German from "courteous" English humour, has become well-known. In view of this continued interest in the final write-up of Schmidt-Hidding's work on humour (1963a, 1963b), in which he consistently ignores his earlier related publications under the name of Schmidt, this paper aims to discourage researchers from basing their work on it for two reasons. The more important one is the flawed, or at least muddled and definitely outdated, methodology of his study. The more delicate one that is focused on here is that the motivation for and the ideological direction of the study are strongly influenced by its author's National Socialist ideology, which Schmidt-Hidding had possibly assumed for opportunistic reasons and abandoned after World War II. I will first document this ideological alignment with National Socialism from Schmidt's earlier work, basically a prelude to his Schlüsselwörter (1963a). Then I briefly present the methodological flaws, to the degree that Schmidt-Hidding was sufficiently explicit about his method to make that possible. This approach of interpreting a complex issue in its historical and social contexts, along with showing what the issue is in contrast to analogous issues, is the important research agenda that Davies brought to humour research.

Keywords: Schmidt-Hidding, Lexical Field Theory, National Socialism.

1. Introduction

1.1. Motivation

Most current adaptations of Schmidt-Hidding's main contribution to humour research (1963) are found in his home discipline of linguistics (see below). But his statements have also been

used in psychological research (e.g., Ruch 1998: 7–9, 2001: 411; Ruch and Heintz 2016). Some linguists are keenly aware of the problematic background of the research (Hausmann 2003; Hutton 1999; Maas 2016; Hempelmann 2017), but often presented its statements without historical embedding or awareness of its background (Attardo 1994: 6f; Santana 2006: 54, 83; Hempelmann and Gironzetti 2015), which includes researchers of humour within linguistics. Thus, it is not surprising that researchers in other fields would have overlooked the underlying ideology or the weakness of the linguistic method and the actual discussion of his results, given that not even linguists were able or cared to do so. The attractiveness of Schmidt-Hidding's 1963 magnum opus *Wit and Humour* (1963b) presumably lies not least in the power of the visualization of its main results (see below).

1.2. Method

The present contribution to the memorial edition for Christie Davies is intended as a cautionary piece of historiography about linguistic research, in particular the politicized research of many German linguists during the so-called Third Reich. During this time, many scholars in the field aimed to support the goals of National Socialism in acts of anticipatory obedience (“*vorauseilender Gehorsam*”), that is: by making themselves as useful as possible to the regime without even explicitly having been ordered to do so. This could be out of fanatical support for these goals, but also for personal gain and advancement under that guise, or both. Other reasons for obedience to the fascist regime were more excusable, including avoidance of acute quite real discomforts and disadvantages for oneself or one's family or simply cowardice.

One such German linguist was Wolfgang Schmidt, whose ideological self-alignment to the Nazi cause led him to shape his work on the lexical field of humour in the ideological mould of the struggle of Germany against its neighbours (and citizens), which became the World War II in 1939. I will argue here that Schmidt's ideology persisted through his post-war internment and still shaped his thinking in his work relevant to our field that he published in 1963.

Research is a social fact, in the social sciences as much as in the non-social number-oriented sciences, both of which have the same legitimacy in claiming objectivity, as Weber (1904), of whom Davies was an admirer, outlines (cf. also Durkheim 1982, of whom the later Davies was a critic, while his earlier work was and to some degree all his work remained staunchly Durkheimian). Thus, as Davies reminds us insistently in practically all of his contributions to humour research, research statements, like jokes, are more fully understood in the context of other social facts. In more concrete terms, the following statement by Davies, while stated about jokes, holds just as much for research on terms for laughter: “we must seek explanations by looking at the social, political, and economic structures within which the jokes emerge” (2002: 228). The present contribution wants to remind humour researchers, linguistic and other, of the social facts that form the background of Schmidt-Hidding (1963b).

This contribution aims to honour the memory of Davies, whose ground-breaking work on humour as play and not aggression I covered in the larger part of my course “Humor in the Humanities” in this Fall semester. That task of preparing this course and writing this paper has provided me with the enjoyable and saddening opportunity to re-read some of his major works (1990, 2002, 2011) and remembering the many times I had the pleasure to discuss our shared passion for humour. The last time this was possible was this summer in Montreal, Quebec, and West Lafayette, Indiana, as he was making what would turn out to be his last trip to this continent and the United States, a country that he loved. At the International Summer School on Humor and Laughter in West Lafayette, I presented many of the ideas that the present contribution is based on to an audience that included Davies. On this occasion some thought

me an agent provocateur for exposing the ideological background of Schmidt-Hidding (1963b). But Christie was very enthusiastic about my efforts, exclaiming “that’s right!” a few times in his inimitable manner, and after my talk we had one of the many discussions on European history that both of us enjoyed engaging in over the years.

1.3. Biographical sketch of Schmidt(-Hidding)

For the sake of clarity, I will quote the linguist under discussion as Schmidt when I refer to his work before 1945, as Schmidt-Hidding for work after the end of the war, and as Schmidt(-Hidding) when the statement holds for his work in general. His name change, executed practically in 1944 and officially approved in 1949, parallels Schmidt-Hidding’s ideological development during and after the so-called Third Reich (1939–1945), when Germany was ruled by a fascist regime under the leadership of Adolf Hitler and his National Socialist Workers’ Party of Germany (Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei, NSDAP). “Colleagues who knew about his past, called him mockingly ‘Smith [in] hiding’” (2003: 305; final phrase English in the original).

Hausmann characterizes Schmidt as an opportunist (2003: 11) who remained “ambivalent” (78) toward National Socialism and was converted to the new ideology relatively late (80). Schmidt still voted for the right-wing, nationalist, liberal Deutsche Volkspartei as late as 1932 (Hausmann 2003: 11), but joined the NSDAP in 1933, as well as the paramilitary Sturmabteilung (SA) in 1935 (396-397). Contemporary colleagues of his referred to Schmidt as a “Super-Nazi” and “villain in the discipline” (Hausmann 2003: 80). He was also called a “loud mouth of little substance” (134), not least because Schmidt was instrumental in writing reports on his colleagues for the new regime in the early years of the so-called Third Reich (500-501). Nevertheless, his post-war denazification papers call him a “good Nazi” (80), and he was eventually classified as “exculpated” (Hausmann 2003: 306), in Group V of the system for the least guilty, where Group I was for war criminals like Hermann Göring. But this might be more of an indication of the laxity of the denazification system than Schmidt’s involvement in the regime. Schmidt is also said to have enjoyed volunteering full time in the Wehrmacht as a trainer of translators from 1942, but returned to a university position in 1944 (305).

Schmidt was the official speaker and main representative of the German Anglizisten (philologists of the English language, literature, history, and culture) for the Aktion Ritterbusch, the self-imposed war mission of the German humanities (“*Geisteswissenschaften*”) initiated by Paul Ritterbusch. This action was initiated in several meetings with much enthusiasm and official support, but ultimately amounted to little (Hausmann 2003: 305–354, 2007). Schmidt’s publication record as part of Aktion Ritterbusch falls short of that of his colleagues and he didn’t even participate in the final meeting (Hausmann 2003: 346). Nevertheless, the Aktion could be seen as the seed of the later Schlüsselwörter (keyword) publications, including Schmidt-Hidding’s *Humor und Witz* (1963a), and many other, now Europeanized, post-war publications in the German humanities.

Further biographical details about Schmidt(-Hidding) can be found in Hausmann’s summary of his life (2003: 499–501) and the sketch in Klee (2003: 546–547). Additional background information, including an overview of the University of Bonn, where Schmidt(-Hidding) spent much of his academic life, are diligently collected in Höpfner (1999) who also summarizes Schmidt(-Hidding)’s life (376–378).

2. German linguistics in the Third Reich

German linguistics was not necessarily on a specific nationalist mission in 1933, when the Nazi party was given control of the country. But distinct research directions had been characteristic of German-language linguistics, *Sprachwissenschaft*, for decades. Nevertheless, the advent of a new political culture brought about the need for a realignment to or resistance of its radically aggressive, chauvinist, supremacist, and nationalist direction. A new philology, or neophilology, [*Neuphilologie*] in contrast to the classical philology [*Altphilologie*] of Ancient Greek and Latin language, literature and culture, seemed called for. Hitler explicitly encouraged a focus on languages of empires like Latin and English, rather than French, the language of a depleted nation (Hausmann 2003: 98), which not least led to the replacement of French by English as the most commonly taught second language in Germany to this day.

According to Maas, the road to this new philology was a continuation of the tendency of German “linguistics to be executed in the wake of romantic ideas as a pledge to racial [*völkisch*] programmatics” (2016: 239). In this view, linguistics is centrally a philological ancillary science that needs to research other languages and cultures, as carried by their languages. This understanding predates, gets instrumentalised in a particular way during, and survives the Third Reich, as I hope to be able to illustrate on the example of the writings of Schmidt(-Hidding). While there was also a push towards truly structuralist German linguistics, making it the science of language, not of languages, Schmidt-Hidding clearly remained committed to the contrastive program of politicized studies of other countries: “reconnaissance of the ancestral enemy [*Erbfeind*],” i.e., France, and perfidious Albion, i.e., Britain, became the rationale of neophilology” (Maas 2016: 391) after World War I. As mentioned above, English in particular was to become the focus of German neophilology as an originally noble Germanic language corrupted by the “French-Jewish disease” of parliamentarism, according to the Nazi ideologist Rosenberg (1930: 643). In this context Martin (2017) claims that German academics during the Third Reich saw the German nation in analogy to the revered culture of Greece, while the French and English were understood as mere civilizations like Rome, perpetuating the Greek culture in diluted, commercialized form.

One main methodological tool, in general as well as for Schmidt(-Hidding) in particular was the intrinsic connection of descriptive analysis and cultural evaluation of German superiority against the inferiority of its neighbours. The German language was thus identified with the German race, assumed to be superior, a language-to-speaker connection that in general had already been dispatched by Saussure (Maas 2016: 369). To the romantic linguist, this invokes a biologicistic conceptualization of languages as organisms in the vein of Bopp and Schleicher and other 19th century German philologists that includes Husserl-like slogans including undefined terms like *Wesen* [“being”], *Ganzheit* [“totality”], *Leben* [“life”], *Organismus* [“organism”], and *System* [“system”], which are intended to inspire a sense of awe and depth.

Originally, Trier’s conceptualization of lexical fields (1931), the key methodology used by Schmidt(-Hidding), was part of the structuralist and synchronic move in German linguistics. But later applications of it, including those by Schmidt(-Hidding), his mentor Deutschbein (Hausmann 2003: 79; cf. Schmidt 1936b), and more established colleagues like Weisgerber (1951), emphasize the diachronic and racial aspects that I will aim to show below. In this context, Hutton summarizes that “the tension between a synchronic, structural semantics and a sense of the importance of historical continuity and panchronic relationships was ultimately resolved in favour of the latter” (1999: 104).

Overall, in the light literature reported in this section, Schmidt(-Hidding) is correctly seen as an active ideologue, shaping Nazi linguistics as well as being shaped by it (see section 1.3). But the desire to expose him as a Nazi must not stand in the way of putting his contribution

into the scientific context as far as it can be reconstructed, which is the aim of the present contribution. In general, the main question that Germans faced after the war was whether their actions qualified them as those who actively pushed the Nazi agenda or if they merely were *Mitläufer*, people acting in the spirit of the times, resulting in various levels of responsibility. As we will see from his writings below, Schmidt(-Hidding) might probably be classified as an active *Mitläufer*, who eagerly brought existing developments in German neophilology into the service of National Socialism. But, for example, nowhere in his writings can anti-Semitism be documented.

I generally agree with Maas that Schmidt may have been motivated by his urge to avoid being sent to the front in the total war that Germany was waging by “sprucing up his academic activities as part of the war effort” (2016: 410). What speaks against this specific assessment is that Schmidt’s ideological submission to the Nazi program is clearly as old as his (1934) programmatic paper, written at a time when nobody in Germany feared being sent to an Eastern Front, which nevertheless could have been anticipated as planned by Hitler according to his earlier writings (1927). But Schmidt may well have feared that in the new Germany, his beloved trips to England could have been curtailed unless he found a convincing way to put them into Nazi service (see below).

The overall strong (at least self-perceived) need to legitimize the humanities for the purpose of National Socialist goals led to *Aktion Ritterbusch* (see above), a campaign in which Weisgerber was the initiator for a linguistic participation: “a comparative investigation of the most important languages in their respective value and sphere of influence...could be presented as a respectable war contribution” (quoted in Maas 2016: 431). *Englandwissenschaft* [“English neophilology”] could be presented as a valuable part of this effort, while everyday research might for a large part continue as before. In contrast to what Maas states about this leading to “normal research spiked with added rhetorical elements” (2016: 430), I see Schmidt’s work essentially influenced by a supremacist perspective, as I will try to show below. Nevertheless, in particular in contrast to Weisgerber, who struggled with exactly the same issues of legitimacy (1951), Schmidt to me remains a mere follower, not an innovative theorist, who over time got more and more caught up in the *zeitgeist* and remained so without any thoughts of resistance. I claim that this taints Schmidt(-Hidding)’s work and any work based on it.

3. Development of Schmidt(-Hidding)’s lexical field approach

3.1. The Nazi *Mitläufer* Schmidt

This section will quote Schmidt’s Nazi-era publications in substantial detail so as to provide a clear picture of his ideological development in his thinking and writing. It aims to expose this chauvinistic attitude, but also to show that he is not so much an ideological mastermind, but more of a *Mitläufer*—a mere participant—and at the most a *Schreibtischtäter*—a perpetrator at his writing desk with less immediate active guilt but no less responsibility—who wanted to ensure his own and his philological colleagues’ relevance in the new National Socialist scheme of things. The main idea was to create a new *Auslandskunde* [“research of foreign countries”], or neo-philology that would let Germans know the essence of other European nations through their languages, in order to be aware of these nations’ strengths and weaknesses as potential allies or, more likely, adversaries.

This is the ideological background of Schmidt (1934), the implicit foreword to Schmidt-Hidding (1963a). Schmidt (1934) contains a detailed outline of its author’s research motivation and agenda for philologies in general and for English philology, *Anglistik*, in

particular. It advocates for a *new philology* with a “*dual* responsibility: it must raise German men and women, who embody the German nature [“*Wesen*”], and it must explain this nature to other nations” (6; emphasis in the original; as in subsequent quotations, all translations mine). Apart from this inner political mission, its external purpose is to “enter the fields of production of the foreign nation [here: England], to which that nation’s language provides special access, grasp the foreign nature in order to reach a total, in the original sense of the word ‘political’ understanding of the foreign people, so that [the philologist] can predict that nation’s reactions or at least interpret them” (6).

The context for these predictions and interpretations is of course the competition with the foreign nation, including an already anticipated war. The remainder of Schmidt (1934) goes into detail regarding how this task is to be achieved by preparing the youth of Germany for these duties, not least through study trips to England. For these they need to be trained as ambassadors of National Socialist Germany, who needed background information as much as ideological preparation to be able to gain an “insight into the mental and political structure of a people” (7), when in that country, not least in order to fight it. This is not just the task of neophilologies like *Anglistik*, but “almost every field of study must go through a change based on the fundamental National Socialist attitude” (7). An essential part of the preparatory training for these study trips is that “the National Socialist German attitude to life must have entered the flesh and blood [of the students] and that they know and love the German homeland and its people. Thus the German student should first have understood their own homeland by hiking it, before going on foreign study trips” (9). Note the characteristically fetish-like German romantic emphasis on the importance of hiking.

Unlike German neophilologists of other European languages and cultures, for Schmidt the *Anglizist* has a special responsibility, because in contrast to other peoples like “the Scots out of an inner family relationship and the Celts through their imaginative adaptability have a more open attitude to us [the Germans] than the more restrained and highly cultivated English people, who basically don’t consider any foreigner as equal because they are world conquerors and an island people, and they assume an opinion about foreign matters that often is affected little by actual knowledge about those matters” (11). I will refrain from further evaluation of the last quote.

As mentioned, the philologist as he or she who studies other languages is considered to have a privileged position and special responsibility, because understanding “the difference in values of the other people” (Schmidt 1934: 13) is best accomplished by studying their language. The reason is that “each word has its fixed position in the political and societal cultural structure of a nation and points to that structure in the word’s specific meaning” (19). An additional benefit is that “the explication of the foreign language, on the other hand, will lead to a grasp of the totality of the foreign life circumstances and thus open a path to [understanding] Germanness” (1934: 21).

In practical methodological terms—and here we see the clear connection to lexical field studies, in general, and Schmidt-Hidding (1963b), in particular—the “task of foreign-language linguistics is to contrast the groups of words that are allotted to the most important areas of life of the foreign people to the corresponding German groups of words and interpret them in connection with the German and the foreign world view [“*Weltanschauung*”]. Because the main contribution of English linguistics to [German] *Anglistik* resided in dictionaries, we find an incredible and already well-sorted material” (1934: 22). This is the first documentation of Schmidt’s focus on core words of a language, later to be distinguished as leading words and key words (see below). Note also how Schmidt belittles the contribution of English linguistics in this passage.

The purpose of this comparison is two-fold to Schmidt: “1. Understanding the reality (of the facts) that is expressed in language; understanding the peculiarity of the expression, 2.

Tracing the peculiarity back to the personality of the speaker, their membership in family, tribe, people, race, and time, which are their racial [*“volklich”*] and personal fate and the structure of their soul” (1934: 23). Schmidt contrasts this with the rationale and methodology of Altphilologie, which he claims overemphasizes etymological studies. This is indeed a useful position, as tracing the change of meanings of a lexical root is often merely illustrative of the vagaries of semantic change. This point is well illustrated by the meanings humour had over time, which are largely irrelevant to its present meaning in English and other languages that use that root. Yet, this criticism is odd, as his own work has a strong etymological component up to and including Schmidt-Hidding (1963b). This misunderstood importance of the etymology of humour is also one of the main contributions by Schmidt-Hidding (1963b) perpetuated by present-day non-linguists using his work.

Illustrating his anti-English thrust in his neophilological methodology further, Schmidt claims that “the English public person [*“Gesellschaftsmensch”*] is mentally so far removed from the Germanic world, at least in their civilization and ideology” (1934: 27), not least because of the un-Germanic, unhealthy influence that French culture had on the English, that Beowulf may be the last all-Germanic contribution by the Anglo-Saxons.

Yet according to Schmidt, all this neophilological works has to be accomplished from an understanding of the superiority of German philosophical history: “Without being deeply moved by German literature, yay, without having studied German philosophy [*“Geistesgeschichte”*], studying foreign literature will lead to nothing or to a vacuous glorification of the ‘other’ [*“Fremdtümelei”*]. This is the undesirable kind of neophilology that praised whatever it considered foreign to high heavens, because it didn’t know the value of their homeland. Thus, the English and French couldn’t have wished for cheaper cultural propaganda” (1934: 29). Entertainingly, Schmidt also denigrates “purely literary studies,” because they “often consider literature the highest achievement of a language and a people [*“Volkstum”*] and steep as low as literary ‘history’ or even purely aesthetic blathering” (28).

In contrast to this, the right kind of neophilology that he is propagating, Schmidt sees, in agreement with Wilhelm Dibelius, in contrast to “the Anglistik of the pre-war era...which failed to fulfil its responsibility to the German people; because the German people learned from it nothing about the English realities and went to war without a deeper understanding of the opponent” (29). This shortcoming during World War I Schmidt wants to prevent for the next war that evidently was already looming as early as 1934. Ideally and eerily expressed, Schmidt sees these neophilologists trained in a “comradeship of learned men...in research camps...which has only become a possibility since the year 1933” (30): men, not women, trained in camps, a favourite Nazi form of organization.

To sum up the ideological background of Schmidt’s neophilology in the 1930s, inspired by his mentors and contemporaries and to be applied in contrastive lexical field studies, like the one on humour and laughter he began shortly after 1934 and published in its fullest form in (1963b), he reiterates:

Productive understanding is only possible on the basis of experiencing one’s own people and living one’s own life. Through the words and deeds of Hitler we have attained unity and a holistic concept of people and nation. We have experienced and we know that the body of our people is a sensitive organism and that none of its parts may long be ill without endangering the existence of the whole body or destroying it.

(1934: 32)

Having been given this new perspective through Hitler, Schmidt again emphasizes what motivation lead him to writing this programmatic publication:

The concern that we must be well-prepared to address in the future for the intellectual and ethical struggle with the world was the guiding principle in my reasoning; furthermore, the concern that in the future we will select and educate people who can fight this struggle. From these concerns seems to stem to me indeed a demand by the German people to the representatives of the neophilologies....We are serving the [German] people with our research, with our yearning for truth, and most of us are serving the profession, for which we are preparing our students. In our manner of working, us, the Germans, must be as thorough and exact as we have been in the past; on these qualities rests the world-wide reputation of German science.

(1934: 35f)

In his review of Schmidt (1934), it was obviously easy for the contemporary American linguist Malone to assert that as little as one year into the Nazi regime “[a]dherence to the National Socialist program is taken for granted throughout—hardly a sound basis for that objectivity without which philology cannot survive as a science” (1936: 566). I hope that my present contribution will show that I wholeheartedly agree with Malone some eighty years later. My discussion furthermore submits that Malone’s sentiment is valid for the post-war publications by then Schmidt-Hidding as well.

In Schmidt (1936a), the author uses the same ideological foundation with a slightly different methodology, when he aims to derive a sketch of a national character of the English by discussing the speeches of two politicians, Stanley Baldwin and Lloyd George. While methodologically less relevant here, probably the earliest published evidence of his interest in humour might be a section on *Humor und Spott* (“humour and mocking”) 225–226). This section presages Schmidt-Hidding (1963b) in its emphasis on self-directed irony and the “racially specific English humour” (*arteigenen englischen Humor*) of understatement.

Another short essay Schmidt published just before the outbreak of World War II in 1939 is evidently based on Schmidt (1936a), but has a much stronger National Socialist bent in its phrasing and explicitly refers to Hitler (1927) as a source of its ideas. In parallel to Hitler’s political stance to the country, Schmidt (1936a) still shows an interest in understanding England as a potential Germanic ally. Four years later, he is clearly construing of England as an opponent in a struggle in the near future (see below). According to Schmidt (1936a), there is no appeasing England, for which peace is only thinkable under its own dominance, a power-political ideology barely hidden behind purported ethics: “we have only one answer to the claims of the Anglo-Saxons. The German people must become more aware of their European mission” (363). This, of course, is the mission of uniting Europe under German rule, now, of course, accomplished under the moniker European Union.

The last Nazi-era publication by Schmidt that I want to consider here is the published manuscript of a war-time speech he gave on occasion of the so-called Altmark incident, in which a British navy unit boarded a disguised German war ship in neutral Norwegian waters. The speech, given the year after Schmidt taught his first seminar on humour in 1939 (Schmidt-Hidding 1959), compares this boarding to the repeated bombing of Copenhagen (1801 and 1807), as well as Alexandria (1882), by the British Navy. This is the first of an unknown number war of lectures given at Münster University, apparently a product of early-war frenzy. Here, Schmidt, prominently identified as a member of the League of National Socialist German Instructors [*Nationalsozialistischer Deutscher Dozentenbund*] on the title page, emphasizes again how he, as an expert on the English language, is preordained to help other Germans to understand the dangerous English mindset as determined by their language, or at least as manifest in it.

This strong version of linguistic determinism, the assumption that our languages only allow us to think in the way that our languages encode the experience of reality, is a vexing axiom that linguists have attempted to turn into testable hypotheses since the early twentieth century, usually under the name Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (e.g., Whorf 1956). Linguistic

determinism, or relativism, especially in its strong version, claims that we are trapped in our thinking in the particular language that we are thinking in. For national chauvinists this can lead to the argument that a certain language can embody not just a different, but the superior way of thinking of a certain culture. Schmidt's ideological assumption of this again illustrates its well-known potentially racist underpinnings: "Whoever is striving for an understanding of the English mindset in present times and in history, understands that the crime that happened in the Jössing fjord from the mindset of the English ruling class, this small layer of rich aristocrats, politicians, and the capitalists, who were educated in the known private schools of their society, the public schools. A thorough check shows that this small class of public school boys [English in the original] holds all the key positions in Great Britain and its Empire" (1940: 4).

Schmidt continues in an ideologically blinkered and unscientifically prescriptivist manner by commenting on the use of "fair" in describing the attack of the British boarding party by The Times (London). His reactions expose a similar type of word-to-meaning fetishism, as non-linguists often subscribe to. "Such a use of the word fair, which is a mockery, should be our occasion to strike this English word [a commonly used loanword in German] from our German vocabulary. We will make sure to protect corresponding German words *ritterlich* [chivalrous] and *gerecht* [just] from such abuse" (1940: 7). This is indeed word fetishism that doesn't acknowledge the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign. This would be excusable on grounds of ignorance by a non-linguist, say a sociologist or psychologist, but they would of course know to consult a linguist to ascertain that their forays into word meaning aren't marred by this fallacy, if they are indeed embarked in bona-fide multi-disciplinary research.

Overall, the tone of voice of Schmidt (1940) has reached the shrill level of war propaganda, which is unscientific even by the standards of its own time. Selected examples, in which literary hyperbole is taken to illustrate the soul of the English, may suffice as illustration: Swinburne's genocidal war cry against the Boers is taken as representative of the English attitude toward other nations in general, British concentration camps and mass murder included (ironically). This speech by Schmidt has little substance worth of reporting, but the fact that he gave it as part of his National Socialist academic persona makes adding a few more quotes relevant to assessing his post-war continuation of comparative lexical-field-based neophilology.:

When 58,000 Germans-by-race ["*Volksdeutsche*"] are murdered like animals in Poland, the British are completely unable to understand the indignation of the German nation. But when 240 British sailors are legally interned on a German ship and treated well, the British demand the sympathy of the whole world....We are of the firm conviction that the British in their hubris can be brought to the acceptance of the right to life of other nations only through defeat. Europe must be freed from the dominance of the English ruling class.

(1940: 10)

Evidently, this war-time pamphlet is rich in Nazi rhetoric, but let me just finish its summary with a final characteristic, chauvinist, sexist, if condensed selection of statements, which I submit will put his post-war publications further in perspective:

We, men of a German university, lecturers and students, are watching with a specific kind of concern as the foundations that cultured peoples have erected for a common existence in peace and in war one after another are destroyed by the English.

(1940: 12)

We Germans know well what this struggle is about: the English ruling class identified in the National Socialist Germany the strongest proponent of all peoples who advocate for social justice in their own country and for a more just distribution of the wealth of this planet in general. We

care little that our demands for political equality are falsely cast as a demand for universal German domination. We, the Germans, know that what this struggle is about is social justice for the world [as a whole].

(1940: 13)

Schmidt's post-war publications, now under the name Schmidt-Hidding, continue in the same methodological vein, but without making his ideological basis fully explicit anymore. The chauvinist underpinning is now toned down from a perspective of German dominance when compared to other European nations to a purely comparative one: one nation among equals, as illustrated in the next section. Nevertheless, the chauvinist ideology remains implicit and Schmidt-Hidding's research cannot be understood without it, as I will try to show

3.2. Post-war Schmidt-Hidding

After the war, Schmidt was interned for his acts during the Nazi reign. After his release in 1948, he returned to his career as a linguist, apparently with few repercussions for his role under National Socialism (see above). His first relevant publication after the war and under his new name is a defence of the *Auslandskunde* ["neophilology"] program with lexical field methodology (1952), hoping to give it continuity past the end of the ideology for the service of which Schmidt and others had developed it.

The central emphasis of Schmidt-Hidding (1952) is no longer in finding the enemy's strengths and weaknesses through their key vocabulary, but comparing the differences and commonalities between two languages and cultures to achieve better understanding for its own sake (174). The author even openly admits to "nonchalant short cuts of the kind that a certain character trait was typically English. The all-too-willing simplifications went so far as to generate an inventory of national character traits" in his previous publications (174). He still favours foreign study trips, two of which he was allowed to go on during the 1930s, as an important pedagogical tool. But, unsurprisingly, he no longer demands a sound National Socialist preparation for the students.

In line with the slightly reoriented program of 1952, in Schmidt-Hidding's short proposal for a new reference book (1955) it is no longer finding the weaknesses and strengths in the enemy that motivated the comparative study of lexical fields of *Hauptbegriffe* ["main terms"], but the "mutual appraisal of cultures" (1955: 297; English in the original). Despite the fact that Schmidt-Hidding still considers it particularly hard to "compare words that are the precipitate of ethical values [of a people]" (297), the purview is still the same: the languages of the main former enemies in the West (Britain, France) and the East (Russia) as compared to German. The proposed approach is indeed the basis of Schmidt-Hidding (1963b), as will be discussed below. He already distinguishes two types of main terms. On the one hand are leading terms (*Leitbegriffe*), which denote the leading ideas of a speaker community and actively influence its behaviour and thinking (e.g., Latin *patria*, German *Kultur*, English commonwealth), much in the sense of a strong Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (see above). On the other side we have key terms (*Schlüsselwörter*) that "unlock the everyday behaviour of a speaker community" (298), like German *gemütlich*, and reflect historical phases of a nation.

Schmidt-Hidding (1956) repeats the same general theoretical ruminations of Schmidt-Hidding (1955), now as the basis for a paper on false friends (Wandruszka 1979). These are words in different languages that share the same root and have related, but crucially different, meanings, which often leads to translation errors. The examples he discusses are E. culture/civilization vs. G. *Kultur/Zivilisation*, E. genial vs. G. *genial*, E. pathetic vs. G. *pathetisch*, E. self-conscious vs. G. *selbstbewußt*, and E. humour vs. G. *Humor*. The discussion of this last example is largely etymological and presages Schmidt-Hidding (1963b),

including the claim that G. Humor in the semantic domain of laughing/smiling was loaned from English as documented by its use in Jean Paul's *Vorschule der Aesthetik* (1804).

3.3. Schmidt-Hidding (1963b)

Schmidt-Hidding's *Wit and Humour* (1963b) is the central publication on key terms in humour in German and English. The study is the pivot of the present contribution as the most-cited humour-relevant work by its author. It is part of a large, multi-author, semantic project based on lexical field theory, edited by Schmidt-Hidding and published in German (1963a). The latter is often misquoted as a monograph (see, for example, Ruch 1998; Ruch and Heintz 2016), when it is actually a collection of essays by three other authors, Weisgerber, Schütz, and Hempel, in addition to the chapter by the editor himself (Schmidt-Hidding 1963b). It has been summarized and assessed on its own merits elsewhere (Hempelmann 2017), of which I will only provide a condensed summary here.

One major problem of Schmidt-Hidding (1963b), apart from the—now implicit—supremacist ideology outlined in the remainder of the present contribution, is that the author does not make his methodology fully explicit. In particular, the study suffers from the general problem of lexical field analyses, where a clear notion of delimiting which words are part of a field, like colour terms or terms for the different relations in a family, and which cannot be determined with a hard theory in such a way that it will survive the attempt at its practical application (cf. Berlin and Kay 1969; Hempelmann and Gironzetti 2015). Schmidt-Hidding (1963b: 25–26) selects six criteria for the inclusion of a word in a shared lexical field: two formal relations based on word forms and four, less tangible, but more relevant, semantic relations [examples from Hempelmann (2017) are added in italics]: 1. shared word stem (etymology): wit-unwittingly; 2. compound words based on the same stem: joke-jokesmith; 3. concepts grouped by a shared property: fool-mime; 4. (near-)synonyms: laugh-smile; 5. connotations: laugh-mouth; 6. lexical fields per se [this category remains too undefined to furnish an example; presumably synonyms, antonyms, and other better-established semantic relationship].

Schmidt-Hidding identifies five subfields, partially according to how words fall into word classes, like nouns, verbs, or adjectives, in German. This choice is not justified linguistically. Next he uses Roget's (1962) thesaurus to harvest the same inventory for English. The relation of the step for German to that of English remains, again, implicit. For undisclosed reasons, Schmidt-Hidding uses two dimensions to structure these five subfields. One is degree of aggression from aggressive ridicule/mock to non-aggressive humour. The other is the degree of cerebrality from cerebral wit to crude fun. Especially this last (vertical in the illustration below) dimension is a clear echo of his ideological Nazi-time contrast of genuine German and contrived English laughter, or as Hutton summarizes Trier's (1939) notion in this regard, the "strong urge to delimit the autochthonous [in this case: German] from the foreign" (199: 109). The two dimensions create a plane, on which he locates the terms from the field, resulting in the much-quoted chart for the English field (1963b: 48; see below).

The five subfields in English, with the distinctions between them remaining unjustified, are populated as follows, with the first example from Schmidt-Hidding given for each of the four extremes of the two dimensions in each field:

1. humor as a facility ("*Anlage*"): wit: wit, humour: humour, fun: fun, ridicule: mockery; 2. humor as a trait ("*Eigenschaft*"): wit: witty, humour: humourous, fun: funny, ridicule: laughable; 3. terms for agents of humor ("*Nomina agentis*"): wit: a wit, humour: humourist, fun: wag, ridicule: satirist; 4. humorous actions ("*der verbale Bereich*") wit: jest, humour: banter, fun: joke, ridicule: mock; 5. objectifications ("*Objektivierungen*"): wit: jest, humour: pleasantry, fun: joke, ridicule: sally.

Next, Schmidt-Hidding proceeds to sort the words by frequency of usage based on the Thorndike English Dictionary (Thorndike 1948), which uses a 20 million word corpus, which is surprisingly large for its time. Thorndike is intended to be a “British Empire edition” (1948: v) of an American English dictionary of the 50,000 most frequent words. A potential weakness is the corpus selection for this “senior version” for students above 15 years of age and adults, including words “that occur oftenest in such books as students do read or should read, plus words that are important for special reasons” (viii). This is a pedagogical criterion that probably affects its representativeness for British English usage in general. Its operationalization is discussed in detail in Thorndike (1948: xiii), foremost its reliance on Thorndike (1921). This reliance presents another reason why using Schmidt-Hidding’s (1963b) results in current research should be discouraged. The English that it represents is not only restricted to British English, it is also almost a century old.

The next step sorts the frequent words by words using the same stem, such as laugh and laughable, and finds the following order of descending frequencies, reproducing here the highest-count lemmata and omitting words that are only “partially used in the realm of humor” (1963b: 41), another unclear criterion. Schmidt-Hidding counts these as the innermost of three zones of the lexical field: laugh, smile, wit, humour, joke, mock, amuse, grin, jest, ridicule (1963b: 41-42, 46).

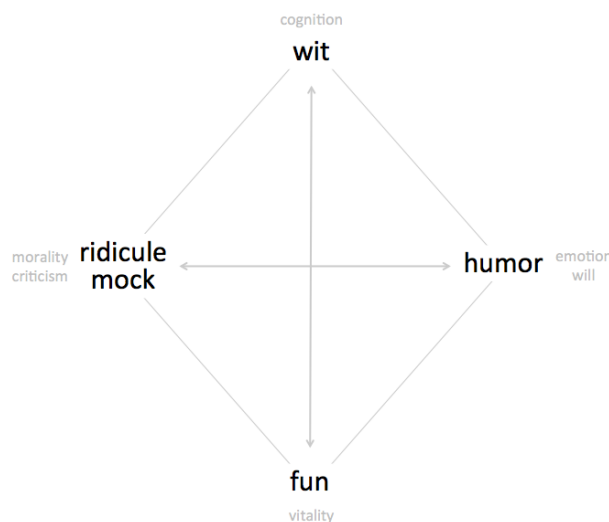


Figure 1. Schmidt-Hidding’s illustration of the two-dimensional field of humour (1963b: 48; simplified from the adaptation in Hempelmann 2017)

After discussing key terms in humor in German and English synchronically, Schmidt-Hidding proceeds with a diachronic, etymological discussion of key terms. His argument that key terms should be studied primarily in the language from which they were loaned is chauvinistic naïveté, as argued in Hempelmann (2017), which also conveniently summarizes the discussion in English: “Loan words can take on very different meanings in the languages that loan them; semantic change is unpredictable: etymology a tool that needs to be used extremely carefully” (38).

The most audible echo of Schmidt’s ideological dichotomy of true Germanness vs. English contrivance as detectable in the respective humor-related vocabularies—expressed repeatedly and strongly in his Nazi-era publications—is evident in this etymological section. He discusses the early two-way contrast between the Germanic ancestors of *laugh*, open, triumphant laughter, and *smile*, inward, potentially aggressive behavior, as amended by Romance loans in the Middle English period (1066 to ca. 1450). He agrees with Wahrig

(1955), who compares the “Germanic warrior democracy of the early Middle Ages and the feudal society of late medieval England” (277). Germanic warriors supposedly laugh like triumphant heroes in the mead hall, while later feudal English people laugh like polite ladies-in-waiting.

4. Conclusion

Being aware of the history of one’s field is important to discover when political bias influences, or even motivates, the direction of findings of research in the field. Otherwise one may perpetuate the crime that was at the heart of past endeavours that were guised as research, but primarily aimed to serve a political purpose. If even those within a field of research, here linguistics, fall into this trap all the more easily will those from other fields be in danger of doing so. The reason is that they often don’t understand or recognize the theoretical underpinnings, but are merely in search of useful results upon which to base their own research on. Without an understanding of the theoretical foundations of a field of research, it is impossible to assess when and where it may have been corrupted by political motivations.

With this contribution I hope to have reminded linguists of the ideological turn that their field took during the nazi regime’s reign in Germany, in particular in lexical field studies in the service of neophilology. This turn invalidates many of the results of these studies, in particular in the case of Schmidt-(Hidding)’s work on the field of laughter. I hope by providing the historical social facts leading up to it, I was able to establish how the vertical dimension in Schmidt-Hidding’s laughter field is, at least in part, a product of his earlier ideological anti-English, supremacist German rationale. Hopefully not only linguists will now be able to avoid continued use of these results, all the more as they are also fundamentally flawed by the etymological fallacy, similarly “romantically” grounded particularly in German research.

Finally, because of the potential rapidity in meaning change, in particular in the domain of slang, it remains unclear to me in which sense Weisgerber referred to Schmidt as an “*Aftergestalt*” (1942), but it can’t be a favourable sense in any way. One straightforward interpretation is that of “mere follower,” another is a direct epithet for anus.

Acknowledgements

I am very grateful for the invitation to contribute to this special edition dedicated to the memory of Davies and the helpful comments of its editors, Delia Chiaro and Giseline Kuipers. I’m also grateful to Dr. Frank Seifart, University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands, Jan Werner of Unterweissach, Germany, and Jake Pichnarcik at the interlibrary loan office of Texas A&M University–Commerce for helping me gain access to some of the sources without which I could not have written this contribution.

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