

Feminazi, breastfeeding nazi, grammar nazi. A critical analysis of nazi insults in contemporary media discourses

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Citation: Horan, Geraldine (2019) "*Feminazi, breastfeeding nazi, grammar nazi. A critical analysis of nazi insults in contemporary media discourses*", *mediAzioni* 24, <http://mediazioni.sitlec.unibo.it>, ISSN 1974-4382.

1. Introduction

In his weekly column for the German broadsheet *Die Welt* ("The World") in 2015, journalist Matthias Heine claims that Nazi is one of the German language's most successful exports (Heine 2015a)¹. He also describes how, in contrast to German, English language has for several decades employed *Nazi* in the less harmful sense of "fanatic" or "enthusiastic", a linguistic phenomenon that would be deeply problematic for Germans (10 February 2015a). As Heine rightly points out, *Nazi* is a loan word from German that has become a recognisable, versatile insult in English; one that can be employed in a variety of contexts and with a variety of meanings, ranging from the narrowly political (i.e. someone is an adherent of National Socialist or, more broadly, right-wing ideology), to the more metaphorical sense that Heine refers to, i.e. that someone is fanatical about a particular interest or pursuit. In its metaphorical sense, *nazi* is extremely

¹ Heine (2015b) claims that *Nazi* and *Blitzkrieg* belong to a collection of "rechte Wörter" ("right-wing words"), and that more recent editions to this internationally recognised lexicon include the acronym *Pegida* that translates roughly to "Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the West" and *Lügenpresse* ("lying press"), an expression used in the NS regime and seen more recently in extreme right-wing discourse, in Germany, Austria, and in the US. I would argue, however, that although *nazi* is related to the NS-regime and far-right, fascist ideology, as the other expressions are, it is also different, as it was not used by Nazis in their propaganda.

productive and is used to coin a range of new expressions with *nazi* as the headword (for example, *feminazi*, *breastfeeding nazi*, *grammar nazi*, *bike nazi*)². *Feminazi* in particular has become a well-known insult, used in mass and online media to discredit and stigmatise women whose views or behaviour are regarded as not only feminist, but moreover threateningly “radical” or “extreme”.

This article will discuss the forms and functions of the *nazi* insult from its beginnings in German to its use as contemporary stigmatising label. The main focus of the analysis is on its use in English, in particular in the UK media, but contrasts will also be drawn with its use in Germany. As a specific example of productive coinings with *nazi*, the article will consider how *feminazi* has become a widespread and controversial insult. Dictionary definitions of *nazi* tend to delineate the historical and metaphorical senses of *nazi*. This analysis will examine how relevant these distinctions are, and will argue that the more recent metaphorical sense of *nazi* in formulations such as *feminazi* cannot be separated from the historical political ones, and that their use relies precisely on these associations. Furthermore, the analysis will also argue that *nazi* is a multilingual and cross-cultural insult.

2. Forms and functions of insults

Nazi is employed as an insult, as a verbal or written expression that is directed at an individual or group, and that is intended to mock, criticise or generally cause offence. Insults typically focus on some aspects of the individual’s (or group’s) physical appearance, character, behaviour, gender, sexual orientation, religious, political and ideological beliefs (Allan and Burrige 2006: 89). They can be interpreted as an act of linguistic violence, one that precedes, accompanies, or is

² Writing during the COVID-19 pandemic in spring 2020, my attention has been drawn to new coinings such as *Coronanazi* (also *Corona-Nazi*), and its totalitarian companion *Coronastasi* (*Corona-Stasi*) in English and German. These are just two examples of an emerging pandemic-related lexicon, documented by Tony Thorne in his blog “#CORONASPEAK – the language of Covid-19 goes viral”, <https://language-and-innovation.com>.

a substitute for physical violence (Culpeper 2006: 59). As such, insults are an obvious manifestation of impoliteness and represent a face-threatening act (*ibid.*: 71, 101); furthermore, at their most extreme – in the form of slander, libel, or hate speech – they are also subject to legal constraints and censure.

Insults can take a variety of forms, and can be uttered in the presence of an individual or group, or indirectly, about a third party (Scheffler 2000: 119). They can also be directed at the self, as in “I am such a dozy twit!”, and, depending on the context, can also be employed positively, as a social bonding mechanism, to praise, congratulate, or to signal solidarity and intimacy. Conventional insults are recognisable formulations, such as *bastard*, *cow*, and often invoke stigmatised or taboo imagery or metaphor, typically animals, sexual organs or acts, or bodily functions. They also frequently take the form of vocative insults in direct communication, which typically consist of two or three components, as in “you twat”, or “you absolute dickhead” (Culpeper 2006: 239). Whether the insult is fully understood depends not only on the immediate setting in which it is uttered, but also on the cultural, linguistic context – insults are often culturally and linguistically bound, and may be subject to change over time (Mateo and Yus 2013: 88-89; see also Horan 2011, 2013).

Therefore, the cultural significance of an insult such as *nazi* depends on the dominant discourses at any given time; therefore, calling someone a “nazi” in 1944 would potentially have a very different impact to doing so in 2014, for example. The specific cultural context is also important, as using the *nazi* insult in the UK, US, or France, is arguably different to using it in Germany. It could also be argued that the greater the temporal distance from the NS regime, the weaker the link between the historical and political associations of *nazi*, and its referred use as “over-zealous”, although, as will be argued in this article, the effectiveness of the insult often relies on (re-)establishing these links.

Insults not only evoke taboo images, they also involve a process of social identity construction. The insulter conceives of the intended recipient as “Other”, as belonging to a particular outgroup, and conversely, the insulter has to identify with the opposing in-group. Insults fulfil a variety of functions, depending on the

relationship between the insulter and insulted party: Karina Korostelina's 2014 study establishes six different categories of insult, thereby emphasising that an insult is not a linguistic action with one solitary function and effect. Her categories comprise *identity insult*, *projection insult*, *divergence insult*, *relative insult*, *power insult*, *legitimacy insult*. From these six categories, "identity insult", "power insult" and "legitimacy insult", are the most relevant when analysing the function of *-nazi* expressions. An identity insult targets the allegiances of the opponent, and destroys their self-esteem. It also creates a distance between the individual issuing the insult and the insulted party; this is particularly pertinent where the insult that is issued is done so because the speaker / writer fears that they could be the target of the insult, and / or that the insult could similarly be directed at them. Labelling someone a "nazi" could be also interpreted as a power insult, as a gambit to gain control of the moral high ground, thereby denying the opponent access to influence and action. For contexts in which one party could conceivably be regarded as dogmatic, blinkered or over-zealous, and therefore lose power (social, political), the "nazi" insult places the recipient in the stigmatised and therefore less powerful group. "Nazi" also functions as a legitimacy insult, as it aligns the recipient's behaviour or ideas with a stigmatised object or group, and in doing so they and their actions in turn become stigmatised. From this point on, anything s/he says, writes or does has no legitimacy, as it comes from a place of taboo. The combative nature of communication on online and social media, particularly on Twitter, and the tendency to create affiliations or "tribes" (e.g. through the use of searchable hashtags, entail that certain recognisable insults such as *feminazi* are a central component of a wider identity-forming process (Zappavigna 2012; Barton and Lee 2013).

3. History of *nazi* as an insult

Having argued that *nazi* is a stigmatising insult, one that challenges an individual's or group's identity, power and legitimacy, I would like to provide a brief overview of the history of the expression, and its emergence as a stigmatising label. Accounts of the history of *Nazi* – its origins and first occurrence

– differ considerably. The entry for *Nazi* from the website of the University of Vechta’s *Arbeitsstelle für Sprachauskunft und Sprachberatung* (“Resource for Language Information and Advice”) refers to several sources that cite different dates for first occurrences. According to Heinz Küpper’s *Illustrierter Lexikon der deutschen Umgangssprache* (“Illustrated Lexicon of German Colloquial Usage”), and Keith Spalding’s *Historical Dictionary of German Figurative Use*, both published in 1984, *Nazi* was first used in 1903 as an abbreviation of the *Nationalsozialen* (“National Socials”), members of the *Nationalsozialer Verein* (“National Social Association”), a centre-left political party founded by Friedrich Naumann in 1896. By contrast, according to Franz Seidler, the first mention of *Nazi* can be attributed to the weekly *Die Weltbühne* in November 1920 (Seidler 1994: 316). Both the University of Vechta’s webpage and Seidler are in agreement that from the early 1920s onwards, *Nazi* refers to “die Nationaldeutschen” (“the National(ist) Germans”) in Austria campaigning for the annexation of Austria by the German Reich. This was then taken up by others, including writer and satirist, Kurt Tucholsky, to refer to a group of Viennese artists in Berlin. *Nazi* was not employed to refer to National Socialists until 1930, following the publication of Josef Goebbels’s pamphlet “Der Nazi-Sozi: Fragen und Antworten für den Nationalsozialisten” (“The Nazi-Sozi: Questions and Answers for the National Socialist”) (1930)³. While the formulation “Sozi” had been in use since the beginning of the twentieth century, its use as an insult did not follow the same trajectory as *Nazi* (Seidler 1994: 325-329). Despite Goebbels’s use of “Nazi”, it was not adopted by party members as a self-description, and instead was employed as an insult by those who had emigrated to escape the regime. Seidler claims that the insult was used widely by the population during the NS regime, and while the use of it was not punished, anyone heard using it would be suspected of having listened to foreign (enemy) radio broadcasts (*ibid.*: 324). Any references to “Nazi” by the National Socialist

³ *Nazi-Sozi* – an abbreviation of *Nationalsozialist* (“National Socialist”) – does not translate straightforwardly into English. The reduplication of the *-zi* syllable comes from the German pronunciation of *-ti-* in *National* as [ts]; in English, an approximate equivalent would be “Nash-Sosh”.

press came in the form of quoting, imitating or otherwise mocking foreign propaganda (Seidler 1994: 324).

Mark Forsyth's *The Etymologicon: A Circular Stroll through the Hidden Connections of the English Language*, by contrast, pursues a link between a German regional nickname and the political insult. He claims that "Nazi" was an abbreviation of the name "Ignatius", and that "Bavarian jokes always involved a peasant called Nazi ... This meant that Hitler's opponents had an open goal. He had a party filled with Bavarian hicks and the name of the party could be shortened to the standard joke name for hicks" (Forsyth 2011: 111-112).

4. *Nazi* as a contemporary political insult in the UK and Germany

The use of *Nazi* as an insult comes under hate speech laws in the UK, and penalties for hate speech range from fines to custodial sentences. High-profile examples of the insult being employed in a public context demonstrate how offensive it is considered to be. In 2008, for example, *Talksport* radio DJ Jon Gaunt was sacked for calling a London local councillor a "Nazi", "health Nazi" and an "ignorant pig" in an interview about the ban on smokers adopting children. A large number of complaints from listeners also resulted in his being censured the following year by Ofcom, the Office of Communications, a regulatory body for broadcasting and communications in the UK (*bbc.co.uk* 2010). More recently, in an aggressive face-to-face encounter outside the Houses of Parliament in London, James Goddard, a right-wing Brexit activist, called MP Anna Soubry a "Nazi" and a "traitor". He pleaded guilty to "intent to cause harassment, alarm or distress, using threatening, abusive, or insulting words or behaviour", and was given a suspended sentence and banned from the immediate vicinity of Parliament (Grierson 2019). The use of *nazi* to delegitimise right-wing political parties, such as the British National Party, the UK Independence Party and the Brexit Party, continues to be the subject of discussion, labelled legitimate by some media commentators and criticised by others as a lazy insult or an over-

reaction (see for example Gill 2019)⁴. The use of *nazi* as an insult that delegitimises not only the recipient but also the insulter has been captured in Godwin's Law (or: Godwin's rule of Hitler analogies). This is an ironic aphorism or adage, formulated by US lawyer, Mike Godwin in 1990, which states that the longer a(n internet) discussion continues, the more likely it is that a comparison will be made with Hitler, or the Nazis, and also that Nazi comparisons tend to terminate discussions. Godwin's point was that Nazi comparisons are hyperbolic and unhelpful in genuine debate. However, more recently, Godwin has commented on possible legitimate uses of Nazi comparisons; for example, after the march by white supremacists in Virginia, USA, in August 2017, he tweeted: "By all means, compare these shitheads to Nazis. Again and again. I'm with you" (14 August 2017)⁵.

By comparison, the attitude of the general public in the UK seems to be more tolerant of *nazi*. The Ofcom report, "Attitudes to potentially offensive language and gestures on TV and radio", published in September 2016, and referring to a survey carried out by Ipsos MORI, found that *nazi* was not regarded as a problematic term. Despite being included in a list of expressions categorised under "Race and ethnicity", and despite this category being considered the most offensive, "Nazi", together with "Hun" and "Jock", were considered "milder" and "of limited concern", compared to the n-word, or "p*ki", which were categorised as "strongest" and "highly unacceptable". The reasoning behind this was that *nazi* was an expression "whose meaning and use had changed and softened over the years" (Ofcom and Ipsos MORI 2016a: 54). In the "Quick Reference Guide" that accompanies the report, *nazi* is therefore summarised as "Mild language, generally of little concern. Acceptable as a factual description when discussing

⁴ See, for example, Charlotte Gill, "Enough with the Nazi analogies. The Brexit Party is not 'fascist'", Daily Telegraph, 03.07.19, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2019/07/03/enough-nazi-analogies-brexit-party-not-fascists/>.

⁵ This was reported widely in the US media; see for example, Abby Ohlheiser, 'The creator of Godwin's Law explains why some Nazi comparisons don't break his famous Internet rule', The Washington Post, 14.08.17, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2017/08/14/the-creator-of-godwins-law-explains-why-some-nazi-comparisons-dont-break-his-famous-internet-rule/>.

Germany under Hitler, and also subsequent extreme right-wing groups. Potentially offensive if used in a modern context to insult German people” (Ofcom and Ipsos MORI 2016b: 13)

In Germany, the question of whether calling someone a *Nazi* constitutes an offence falls under Paragraphs 185 Beleidigung, 186 Üble Nachrede and 187 Verleumdung (covering slander, libel and defamation) of the Strafgesetzbuch (“Criminal Code”) (www.stgb.de). Since the end of the Second World War, during the division of Germany and post-unification, *Nazi* and related coinings such as *Nazi-Methoden* (“Nazi methods”), have been employed to delegitimise political opponents (Stötzel 1995; Eitz and Stötzel 2007; Weinert 2018, Giesel 2019). Despite the presence of *Nazi* and other NS-related insults in political discourse in Germany, they are still considered to be extremely offensive and taboo – linguist Linda Giesel describes them as possessing “extremely explosive power” (“eine außerordentliche Sprengkraft”), as they imply that the person is “highly immoral” (“hochgradig unmoralisch”) (Giesel 2019: 1). As in the UK, there have been many high-profile legal cases involving (mostly) right-wing politicians. In 2017, for example, Alice Weidel, Co-leader of the right-wing political party Die Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) (“Alternative for Germany”) sued the satirical TV show “extra3” for calling her a “Nazi-Schlampe” (“Nazi slut”). Her case was unsuccessful, as the federal court in Hamburg ruled that the insult was permissible in the context of political satire, and that as a public figure, Weidel had to expect harsh criticism (sueddeutsche.de 2017). In a cross-cultural and inter-lingual example, in 2017 a traveller from the US was sued for slander by Frankfurt Airport police, claiming that she called them “fucking German Nazi police”, when she was stopped for carrying too many liquids in her hand luggage. The woman denied this, maintaining that instead she had queried why she was being stopped rather than “the Nazi-looking dude” with a “Hitler’s youth haircut”, who was also in the queue (Schuster 2018). The question here is whether the offensiveness was greater because it was directed at a public official, or because of cross-cultural differences and sensitivities in using Nazi comparisons or insults in the German- and English-speaking worlds.

5. *Nazi* as a German loanword in English

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *Nazi* is a German loan word that entered the English language in the 1930s, and functions as a noun and an adjective. The *OED* lists the first citation of the noun as on 19 May 1930, in *The Times* newspaper: “In another encounter after midnight a “Nazi” shot two Communists dead with an automatic revolver.” The definitions range from historical to metaphorical:

1. A member of the National Socialist German Workers' Party (now *historical*); a member of any similar organization. Also more generally, usually in *plural*: the German government or armed forces in the period 1933–45 (now historical).
2. a. In extended use: a believer in or sympathizer with the aims or doctrines of Nazism or any similar doctrines. Also more generally: a person holding extreme racist (esp. anti-Semitic) or authoritarian views, or behaving in a brutal and bigoted manner.
3. b. *hyperbolically*. A person who is perceived to be authoritarian, autocratic, or inflexible; one who seeks to impose his or her views upon others. Usually *derogatory*.

The referred senses of *nazi* (2a and 2b) developed later, according to the *OED* – 1967 and 1982 respectively. The example for the hyperbolic sense is “Safety Nazis”, an indication of how productive formulations with *nazi* would become in subsequent years. In his analysis of German loanwords published in 1998, Michael Stubbs points to the likelihood that if asked to name German words used in English, respondents would list terms relating to National Socialism and the Second World War, including *Nazi* (1930), *Third Reich* (1933), *Nazism* (1934), *Führer* (1934), *Gestapo* (1934), *Luftwaffe* (1934), *Anschluss* (1938) and *Blitzkrieg* (1939) (Stubbs 1998: 19). Searching for German loans in the COBUILD 1995 corpus, he finds that only *Blitzkrieg*, *Nazi* and *Nazism* appear, and comments that “The German origin of such loans is certainly recognized by English speakers: indeed, that is the whole point of using them. In that sense, they are not English

words at all, but German words which can be used in English to refer almost exclusively to a particular historical period" (*ibid*: 21).

Schröter and Leuschner's (2013) categories of Germanisms in British Newspapers offer some context for the use of *nazi* in the broader context of Germanisms in English, with reference to vocabulary from the Second World War, including *Anschluss* and *Blitzkrieg*. Nazi can be categorised as *historical usage* – original, historical context, with reference to the 1933-45 Nazi regime, *topical and updating usage* – referring to the rise of contemporary neo-nazi organisations in Germany and Austria, *updating usage* – referring to nazi organisations, activities and ideas propagated beyond Germany and Austria, and most significantly for its current function as a loan word, and as the head component for new coinings, discourse transposition – described by Schröter and Leuschner as

[T]he highest degree of appropriation, indicating that the term is not exclusively tied to its historical context, and that it is familiar enough to use ... metaphorically, i.e. with a different phenomenon that is by way of the *tertium comparationis*, likened to e.g. a Blitzkrieg in terms of warfare (e.g. political blitzkrieg, advertising blitzkrieg, second-half blitzkrieg). (2013: 155)

Following on from this, the question is, where do these compounds with *nazi*, such as *feminazi*, *grammar nazi* fit into this subset of German loans? Are they still German loan words, or is the fact that they are combined with an English component, such as *grammar*, or *breastfeeding* mean that the specific historical point of reference is no longer foregrounded? Online metalinguistic discussions about the appropriateness of using *nazi* terms as doubly offensive (i.e. comparing individuals or groups to National Socialists, and diluting the atrocities associated with the regime) seems to suggest that the directness of this link is contested. I would argue, however, that while *nazi* may be used in a broader sense, the semantic, cultural links to its primary, historical use, are nevertheless present. This is a different, if still related, usage to labelling political opponents as "nazis".

6. *Feminazi* in English

Feminazi is one of many *-nazi* coinings in English that also include examples such as *baby nazi* (an over-zealous advocate of childcare advice), *bike nazi* (a cyclist that is intolerant of poor road sense from pedestrians and motorists (see also *lycra nazi*), *coffee nazi* (someone who is militantly passionate about coffee), and *nipple nazi* (a zealously passionate advocate of breast rather than bottle feeding). *Feminazi* in particular has become a well-known stigmatising expression, a label or insult in mainstream, online and social media. It is an umbrella term, used as a noun or adjective, to label any aspect of women's utterances or behaviour as radical or even tyrannical. The *Oxford English Dictionary* cites the earliest attested use of *feminazi* as being in a report from the Orange County edition of the Los Angeles Times from 4 July 1989 on anti-abortion protests and the slogans they employed: "Thank You Lord for This Victory in Life" and "Feminazis Go Home". As the article reports, rather than coins the expression, it can be assumed that its origin in anti-feminist circles was earlier. As the OED also states, *feminazi* gained wider currency after being used by US "shock jock" Rush Limbaugh in the early 1990s. Since then, it has become a well-known insult in mass and social media, and is a contested label, frequently the subject of meta-linguistic discussions about its sense, reference, and the appropriateness and offensiveness of its use⁶.

A search of the English Web corpus from 2015 (enTenTen15, size of corpus: 15,703,895,409), using Sketch Engine's concordance tool, reveals 282 occurrences, which equates to a frequency of 0.02 per million⁷. Therefore, it is not a commonly-used term, yet it is not the frequency that is relevant here, rather, the ideological and political significance of its use in context. *Feminazi* appears in a variety of typographical formats: in lower case, as a single lexeme, with an initial capital letter, all capitals, as in "STRONG against the Sharia Soshulist

⁶ See also the entry for *feminazi* in Burrett (2006: 105).

⁷ Sketch Engine is a searchable online corpus tool developed by Adam Kilgaraff (Kilgariff *et al.* 2014).

Marxist Jihadist FEMINAZI AGENDA!” (not the collocation with other stigmatising political insults), as well as hyphenated, “femi-nazi”, or “Femi-Nazi”. Using the collocations search function to chart co-occurrences three lexemes to the left and right side of “feminazi”, common collocations (excluding function words such as auxiliary verbs, pronouns, and prepositions), include “humourless”, “lesbian”, “Left”, “bunch”, “Liberal”, “radical”, “fat”, “groups”, and “agenda”. They further stigmatise *feminazi*, and attribute additional and specific characteristics – feminazis have no sense of humour, are extreme, left-wing, physically unattractive, act collectively, and are driven by ideology. To refer back to Korostelina’s categories of insult, these collocations contribute to the identity insult of those described as *feminazis*, also diminishing their power, as they belong to a particular tabooed political affiliation; their legitimacy is also undermined, as the equation with *nazi* means that they are not only fanatical (in the hyperbolic sense of the word), they are motivated by a political “agenda”, and ultimately, like the Nazis in the 1930s and 1940s, are undemocratic and tyrannical.

These associations are also reflected in UK media discourses that employ the expression and / or debate its validity. A search for *feminazi* on the Lexis®Library News archive (*nexislexis.com*) yields 274 results between October 1992 and November 2019⁸, with stories featuring in national broadsheets, tabloids and regional newspapers, including *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *The Times*, *The Daily Mail*, and *Mail on Sunday*. In terms of frequency, it appears that the occurrence of *feminazi* peaked in 2015 (85 occurrences), with roughly half the number in 2016 (42), and then declined in the following years (20 in 2018 and 13 by the end of November 2019). The high number in 2015 is attributable to the Charlotte Proudfoot story (as will be outlined below in further detail: Proudfoot was a barrister in the UK, who publicly shamed a male colleague for commenting on her appearance online); occurrences in 2016 are linked to both the ongoing Proudfoot story, and to Hillary Clinton’s candidacy for the US presidential election

⁸ The first occurrence of *feminazi*, according to the search, was in October 1992, and I conducted this search at the beginning of December 2019, hence the cut-off date being the end of November 2019.

in November 2016. Rather predictably, therefore, there is a marked increase in the use of *feminazi* in the mainstream media, whenever a female public figure makes headlines. This can be seen as part of a wider phenomenon of gendered criticism, bullying and trolling aimed women in the public eye (Hardaker and McGlashan 2016; Smith 2018).

A search for collocations employed in the newspaper articles from 1992 to 2019 reveals similar patterns to those EnTenTen15 collocation search on Sketch Engine. Verbs co-occurring with “feminazi” include “branded”, “accused (of being)”, “dubbed”, “labelled”, and “feminazis” themselves “barrack” and “emasculate” others; the expression is also referred to metalinguistically as a “slur” and an “ugly term”. As a noun and adjective, it is linked to “political correctness”, “conspiracy”, and “agenda”, to witches (“feminazi coven”), and co-occurs with other insults, some gender-specific, some not, including “harpie”, “lesbian”, “snotty cow”, “diva”, “cat lady”, “bullies”, “snowflake”, “libtard”, “SJ” (= “Social Justice Warrior”), “turbo-cucks”, “commie”, “liberal elite” and “leftie”. “Feminazis” are typically described as being “dangerous”, over-sensitive and caring (“bleeding heart”, “touchy”), “man-hating”, “strident”, “shrewish”, prudish and lacking a sense of humour (“touchy feminazi with the sense of humour of a Ryvita”⁹). In short, *feminazi* encompasses every characteristic deemed unacceptable to a right-wing heterosexual and patriarchal audience. Many of these expressions and collocations can also be employed in a humorous self-deprecating way, for example, “I don’t wish to come over all feminazi, but ...”, or “call me an iron-knickered feminazi, but ...”, as well as to challenge the power of the insult by mocking it in excessively dramatic formulations such as “the turbo-cucks are emasculating our Anglo man-warrior nation”. Whether used as direct insults, as quotations or ironic replications of extreme misogynistic expressions used in social media and anti-feminist forums, these examples nonetheless demonstrate the ideological and discursive currency of *feminazi*, and its

⁹ *Ryvita* is the brand name for a type of crispbread.

effectiveness as an insult that serves to stigmatise the behaviour and actions of women.

As mentioned above, clusters of articles on *feminazi* occur in response to particular gender-related news events. A particular example of this is from 2015, when the barrister Charlotte Proudfoot publicly exposed a fellow male barrister who had contacted her via the professional networking site *LinkedIn* to tell her that, while he was aware that he was about to write something “politically incorrect”, he nonetheless felt compelled let her know that her profile photo was “stunning”. On *Twitter*, Proudfoot posted the email exchange on Twitter, describing the male barrister’s response as “unacceptable and misogynistic”. This was immediately seized upon by media commentators, who debated whether on the one hand Proudfoot’s actions were justified in highlighting all-too-common sexist behaviour in a professional environment, or whether on the other hand they constituted an over-reaction to a “harmless” compliment. Proudfoot herself joined in the debate, writing several articles in the left-wing broadsheet newspaper *The Guardian*, in which she explained her actions. Early on in the media coverage of this story, Proudfoot was labelled a “feminazi” by her detractors, which in turn generated metalinguistic consideration of the appropriateness of the term. In September 2015, on the BBC’s late-evening television news magazine programme *Newsnight*, presenter Evan Davis began the feature on the Proudfoot story by stating, “[t]o some she was a brave whistleblower who dared to call out sexism. To others she was a feminazi who’d overreacted to an innocent compliment”. This generated many complaints claiming that Davis was guilty of normalising or even legitimising a misogynistic insult that, as journalist Claire Cohen commented in the right-wing broadsheet *The Daily Telegraph*, was “a poisonous portmanteau of the words ‘feminism’ and ‘Nazi’” that prior to this had been “largely confined to the darker corners of the internet” (Cohen 2015). The accompanying image is of Adolf Hitler, which reinforces the link between the historical and the more recent hyperbolic senses.

Looking more closely at some select examples of newspaper articles from 2015, it is evident that *feminazi* as an insult occurs predominantly in *The Daily Mail*, a tabloid that presents largely reactionary, right-wing views. Women journalists

writing for the newspaper, including Amanda Platell and Sarah Vine, frequently position themselves as arbiters of “common sense”, and label women that oppose misogyny and sexism as a “feminist lynch mob” that have “given women a bad name” (Platell 2016). A divide is created between “sensible” women and feminists (= *feminazis*), and sexist or misogynistic utterances or behaviour by male celebrities or politicians are either defended or criticised mildly as silly or inappropriate. Strong reaction by women to such examples is portrayed as an over-reaction at best, and damaging to women’s rights at worst. In her criticism of women who called for the resignation of biologist Tim Hunt in 2015, Platell refers to them collectively as the “baying mob of feminist fascists”. The original outcry had followed Hunt’s supposedly humorous remarks about women being a problem in laboratory environments because they often cried when criticised, and because male scientists tended to fall in love with them. While Platell admonishes Hunt for making what she considers to be a misjudged joke, her ire is largely reserved for “the grievance-obsessed sisterhood”. Her metalinguistic commentary creates the oppositional pairs of *feminism* and *feminazism*: “Feminism has achieved huge things for women. Feminazism could undo some of those achievements” (Platell 2016).

In a similar vein, Julia Hartley-Brewer employs *feminazi* in her criticism of the campaign to end the “tampon tax”, VAT or sales tax added to sanitary products. In her article, published in the centre-right-wing broadsheet *The Telegraph*, “The campaign to end VAT on tampons is one of the silliest the sisterhood has ever mounted” (2015a), Hartley-Brewer uses “modern feminism” and the “modern feminazi movement” synonymously, as an ideological standpoint that “views everything from the standpoint of women as victims of an ingrained patriarchal system”. Rather than criticising feminism *per se*, Hartley-Brewer uses the *feminazi* insult to target *modern* feminism, claiming that the feminist movement has lost its way, and now pursues misguided and radical campaigns. Against this, Hartley-Brewer positions herself as the representative of *sensible* women, who have contempt for such nonsensical ideas and activities. In response to criticism about her article, Hartley-Brewer wrote a second article, a metalinguistic commentary on *feminazi* and a defence of her right to use it (2015b). The tagline

reinforces the link between *feminazi* and *nazi*: “That’s just the kind of free-speech hating, authoritarian, doctrinaire behaviour the Nazis approved of – don’t you get it?” This is accompanied by a photograph of rows of women soldiers “goose-stepping”, the caption informing the reader that these are North Korean women “NOT Nazi German” (capitals in the original), reinforcing the link between feminists, Nazis and authoritarian views. Jokingly, Hartley-Brewer refers to *feminazi* as the “F-word”, a taboo and offensive term on a par with the “other F-word” (= *fuck*). Positioning herself as a “card-carrying feminist”, she disputes criticism that she is equating those she labels “feminazis” with mass murderers, citing “grammar-Nazi” as another example of a non-offensive expression with *nazi*, that “doesn’t imply that they want to send people to the gas chambers for misplacing apostrophes”. In her metalinguistic defence of the expression, Hartley-Brewer nonetheless blends the historical, extended and hyperbolic (metaphorical) senses; on the one hand refuting links with Nazi atrocities, but on the other hand including an image of women soldiers and a caption that reminds readers of “typical” Nazi behaviour.

7. Expanding the gendered lexical field of insults: *breastfeeding nazi* and *lacto-fascist*

Feminazi is part of a lexical field of insults relating to National Socialism or fascism that criticise women’s actions or behaviour. Many of them are targeted specifically at women’s role as mothers. Some have *nazi* as the head word, such as “baby nazi”, to refer to childcare experts who promote a routine-based approach to parenting babies, “breastfeeding nazi”, “lacto-nazi” and “nipple nazi”¹⁰ as an insult aimed at anyone who is perceived to promote breastfeeding in a militant way. These labels contest the dominant discourses that advocate the superiority of breastfeeding over formula feeding, and are used, albeit in an unsubtle fashion, to challenge the pressure placed on women to breastfeed their babies, and to

¹⁰ This is not to be confused with *nazi nipple*, which, according to *urbandictionary.com*, is an erect nipple that refuses to stay flat.

stigmatise those women that do not. Further examples include the blend “Breastapo”, as well as “breastfeeding gestapo”, “breastfeeding fascist”; these in turn are part of a wider field that incorporates other types of stigmatising or negatively charged labels associated with enforcement, e.g. police (“breastfeeding police”), or intimidation, such as “mafia” (“pro-breastfeeding mafia”), and “fanatic” (“breastfeeding fanatic”), such as “lactivist” and “titty terrorist”). A search on Sketch Engine, Lexis®Library and on Twitter reveals that the frequency of use of these expressions peaked in the years 2012-2017, since then they seem to occur less frequently, although they are now commonly understood. The existence of a lexical field relating to National Socialism and fascism would suggest that the link between the historical sense and the hyperbolic senses are maintained and are necessary for the insult to be truly offensive. As a clear example of this link, an article in the *Financial Times* by Katie Martin, entitled “Dear mums: don’t let the bottle bashers get you down” (10 August 2017), was accompanied by a cartoon picturing a mother, carrying a petrol can, and a baby in a buggy, both dressed in Gestapo uniform, watching a bonfire of baby bottles. The dominant colours in the cartoon brown (for the uniforms and background) and red for the flames, drawing on colour imagery associated with the Nazis. The link to the article on Twitter reinforces the NS reference in its title: “Say hello to ‘the Breastapo’”.

8. *Grammar nazi* in English – a more “harmless” insult?

In her analysis of Nazi comparisons, Giesel argues that *feminazi* and *grammar nazi* (or the German *Grammatiknazi*) differ semantically. She argues that *Feminazi* relies on the interconnection between metaphor and direct associations with National Socialists or fascists, whereas *grammar nazi* is largely disassociated from historical and political meanings – instead the expression is firmly metaphorical (Giesel 2019: 74-75). Comparing the use of *feminazi* with *grammar nazi*, a search on Sketch Engine results in 311 occurrences. Similar to *feminazi*, the frequency is 0.02 per million – not statistically significant, but in use in informal contexts, and in online communication in particular. Unlike

collocations with *feminazi*, however, there are few co-occurrences with other politicised insults such as “social justice warrior”. Collocations with *nazi* suggest that discussions thematise differences in meaning between *nazis*, meaning supporters of NS ideology, and *grammar nazis* as language pedants. A frequent collocation is with “self-confessed”, highlighting the partial shift in function from being an insult to a positive label. Although *grammar nazi* began as an insult, it can also be used either as a self-deprecating or positively charged one in the sense of “reclaiming” a stigmatising label, and expressing pride at displaying the dogmatic, rigid characteristics associated with the expression. This positive sense, underpinned by the cultural capital and prestige that is attached to manifestations of supposed linguistic punctiliousness and purist attitudes, is reflected in the merchandising that is available in the form of t-shirts and hoodies, as well as coffee mugs that bear the expression “grammar nazi”. There are also many memes on the internet that jokingly refer to the expression: for example, “When comforting a grammar Nazi, I always say softly, ‘There. Their. They’re’”. Although there are examples of *feminazi* being claimed as a positive label, seen in individuals’ Twitter handles that use the expression, or in Facebook groups such as “Feminazis Against Actual Nazis”, the depoliticised positive associations of *grammar nazi* are more widespread, not least because *feminazi* combines two politically charged components – *grammar* is not as politicised as *femi* (*feminist*). Consequently, it could be argued that the positive indexical phenomena associated with *grammar nazi* indicates a decoupling of the hyperbolic sense of *nazi* from its historical meaning. However, similar to media articles about *feminazi* and *Breastapo*, articles of merchandising and memes are often accompanied by NS symbols and other recognisable iconography, including red and black colours, the swastika – including the capital letter “G” fashioned into a swastika-like shape, superimposed on the image of the German imperial eagle (*Reichsadler*), images of Adolf Hitler and gothic typeface. Therefore, as with *feminazi*, the historical link still plays a key semiotic and semantic role.

9. *Feminazi, grammar nazi: an English-language phenomenon?*

Despite *nazi* being originally a German loanword, *feminazi* and *grammar nazi* are English coinings. Given the popularity of English as a donor language, is it possible to find evidence of such coinings being borrowed into other languages, either as loanwords, or through loan translation? Searches for *feminazi* on Sketch Engine, using French-, Spanish-, Italian- and German-language web corpora revealed the following number of hits and frequency per million (see Table 1.1 below):

enTenTen15	frTenTen17	esTenTen18	itTenTen16	deTenTen13
Size of corpus: 15,703,895,409	5,752,261,039	17,553,075,259	4,989,729,171	16,526,335,416
282 (0.02 per million)	18 (less than 0.01)	2,186 (0.11 per million)	8 (less than 0.01)	178 (0.01 per million)

Table 1.1. Number of occurrences and frequency of *feminazi* in selected language corpora in Sketch Engine.

Although a somewhat blunt tool, due to differences in the size of the corpora and the years in which they were compiled, there are some trends that can be observed. Rather surprisingly, it is the Spanish rather than the English corpus that has by far the largest number of occurrences. This is largely due to the fact it is based on a more recent corpus than the others, and therefore also includes examples of *feminazi* linked to public debates surrounding the anti-feminist policies of the right-wing populist party Vox. German has slightly fewer occurrences than English, and French and Italian by comparison, have a negligible number, yet there is evidence to suggest that coinings with *Nazi*, including *Feminazi*, *Grammar Nazi* (*Grammatiknazi*, or *Sprachnazi*), are found in online and social media (Giesel 2019: 72). A cursory search on Twitter for 10-30 November 2019 showed 41 occurrences of *Feminazi* or *Femi-Nazi*. A further cursory Twitter reveals that it also occurs in Spanish, French and Italian.

Looking at the occurrences of *grammar nazi* in the Sketch Engine corpora (see

Table 1.2), Spanish and French have the largest number of occurrences, although they are still statistically insignificant.

EnTenTen15	frTenTen17	esTenTen18	itTenTen16	deTenTen13
311 (0.02 per million)	109 (0.02)	111 (0.01)	49 (0.01)	36 (less than 0.01)

Table 1.2. Number of occurrences and frequency of *grammar nazi* in selected language corpora in Sketch Engine.

German has the least, which could be explained by the fact that the corpus is now seven years old, and therefore does not reflect more recent, colloquial borrowings. As mentioned at the beginning of the article, the taboo nature of the Nazi insult in German is also potentially a contributory factor. It is certainly the case that in his article for *Die Welt* (2015a), Matthias Heine considered it necessary to explain the concept of a *grammar nazi* to his readers. Heine’s article focuses on US computer programmer Bryan Henderson, who has spent several years correcting all *Wikipedia* entries that contain “comprise” and “of”, eliminating “of”, as Henderson considers this incorrect. The main thrust of the article is that Henderson is wrong to correct “of”, but in the opening sentence, Heine thematises and explains the concept of the *grammar nazi*: “Im Englischen nennt man Leute wie Bryan Henderson **Grammar Nazis**” (“In English, people like Bryan Henderson are referred to as **Grammar Nazis**”) (italics and emphasis in original). Heine claims that in German, the equivalent expression would be the rather clumsy “Korinthenkacker” (“pedant”) ¹¹, the reason being that for several decades *nazi* has had the “more harmless” meaning of “fanatic” or “enthusiast”. Although this could be seen as “Holocaust-Verharmlosung” (“trivialising the

¹¹ The literal translation points to a more scatological origin: *Korinthen* are “currants”, and *Kacker* is a colloquial term for someone who defecates (= “pooper”). Therefore a ‘Korinthenkacker’ is a ‘currant pooper’, someone who is so small-minded that they will not leave poop bigger than a currant behind. The online article on “Korinthenkacker” by German broadcasting company *Deutsche Welle* suggests “anal retentive” as a near equivalent (12.09.11). <https://www.dw.com/en/korinthenkacker/a-6615906>.

Holocaust”), he argues, this is a well-established expression in English – in the 1980s, there were “Aerobic Nazis”, and now “Grammar Nazis”. The NS-related theme is maintained throughout the article, with parallels drawn to German-language purists who make similar complaints about verb-preposition combinations, whom he describes humorously, in a similar vein to *grammar Nazis*, as “die deutschen Grammatik-Blockwarte” (“the German grammar block keepers”)¹².

Despite German-speakers’ apparent reluctance to use *nazi* as an insult in its hyperbolic sense, online searches show that these coinings are now being used in German, often in the form of loan translations: *Öko-Nazi* (“eco-nazi”), *Grammatik-Nazi* (“grammar nazi”), *Fahrrad-Nazi* (“bike nazi”), *Kaffee-Nazi* (“coffee nazi”), *Küchen-Nazi* (“kitchen nazi”), *Musiknazi* (“music nazi”) (Giesel 2019: 72-77). While *Feminazi* is a direct lexical transfer, *Grammatik-Nazi* is a loan translation, and a concordance search on Sketch Engine shows 26 occurrences for *Grammatiknazi* and 19 for *Grammatik-Nazi*. Although the frequency is low, the expression does exist (Giesel 2019: 76). A Twitter search from 1-30 November 2019 showed 17 occurrences for *grammar nazi* in German and 36 for *Grammatiknazi* and *Grammatik-Nazi*. From this, it appears that having started out as a loanword *from* German, expressions such as *feminazi* and *grammar nazi* are being borrowed *into* and used in German.

10. Concluding remarks

For many decades, *Nazi* has been employed as an insult, and found its way into many different languages. In English, its use and range has expanded beyond the historical, in the form of coinings such as *feminazi* and *grammar nazi*. *Feminazi* in particular has become a well-known gendered insult, and is linked to a further lexical field of NS-related expressions that seek to criticise and

¹² *Blockwart* (“block keeper”) is an NS administrative title, referring to a “Low-level Party Organizer, who on a local level kept Germans in line, often reporting remarks he considered hostile to the regime” (Michael and Doerr 2002: 101).

stigmatise women's behaviour (*breastfeeding nazi*, *Breastapo*). Despite the fact that *nazi* in many insults has the sense of "over-zealous" or "fanatical", its effectiveness as an insult often relies on close associations with the NS regime and ideology. This is evident from the contexts in which the expression is used, and the accompanying use of related vocabulary and images, as well as from the metalinguistic discussions that accompany the insult. Those who employ expressions with *nazi* often attempt to emphasise its metaphorical, hyperbolic sense, while those who criticise its use question its appropriateness, arguing that it trivialises the Holocaust and is disrespectful of those who suffered from Nazi aggression and genocidal policies.

Changes in the political landscape of several Western democracies, in particular the rise of right-wing populist parties, means that *nazi* in its political and hyperbolic senses now co-occur and confront each other in the same discourse environments, that is, in online and social media. This has led to metalinguistic commentaries on the function of *nazi* – is it an insult, or a description? What is the difference between *nazi* as a general insult and as a specifically political insult, and is it desirable to mark this lexically by distinguishing between a *feminazi*, *grammar nazi*, *safety nazi*, and an *actual nazi*, *real nazi* or *nazi-nazi*? Despite the prevalence of *nazi* insults in English, there is evidence that the insult is a multilingual and cross-cultural one, and even in German, the donor language for *nazi*, a more recent range of expressions are being partially "re-borrowed" from English into German.

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