

Bettina Wolf

**What's in a T-shirt? Semantic distance
towards a global language**

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FSU Jena
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What's in a T-shirt?
Semantic distance towards a global language

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1 The mass phenomenon of t-shirt slogans

Only five years ago, only young people were labelled. Today, everybody is caught. Recently, I saw an approximately 70-years-old lady with a hip complaint wearing a jacket with the words THE SPIRIT OF FASHION four times repeated on its lower hem. On the back of the jacket, which has never been modern and will never be modern, was a triangular leather patch without any function which said ACTIVE LIFE MORE AND MORE. [...] Why does the population let this happen to them? Do they think it is cool to be labelled?

Max Goldt, columnist of the satire magazine *Titanic* (my translation, J.B.)¹

As Goldt observes, texts on clothes have become a mass phenomenon. Especially among young people, it is popular to wear a t-shirt which is imprinted with a slogan. Most t-shirts sold and worn in Germany are not imprinted in German, but in English. This essay will attend to the question in how far this situation has an impact on the message character of t-shirt slogans. To prove that the relation of German t-shirt wearers to the messages on their chests is marked by a ‘semantic distance’, we will first discuss the general textual and communicative characteristics of texts on t-shirts. Then we will analyse the propositional strategies which are used and ask for their function. The last part of the essay will deal with the role of English as the global language of popular culture. It will be shown that the relation of Germans to this global language weakens the expressive impact of t-shirt slogans. The essay will focus on fashionable slogans that are worn voluntarily and possibly with a certain intention. No attention will be paid to t-shirts displaying band names, brands, or slogans with an advertising function. The main data were collected in fashionable chain stores in Jena in June 2006 (Colosseum, H&M, New Yorker, and Pimkie).² Occasionally, ‘found’ slogans have been included.³

¹ Max Goldt, *Okay Mutter, ich mache die Aschenbechergymnastik in der Mittagmaschine. Beste „Kolumnen“ & Beste Nicht-„Kolumnen“ in einem Band.* (Frankfurt/ M.: Zweitausendeins, 1999) 342.

² For a representative list of slogans found in Jena see appendix.

³ For a detailed analysis of the characteristics of t-shirt slogans, the data basis would have to be more precisely limited. But this essay is only a first consideration of the linguistic dimensions of the phenomenon.

2 Communicative functions of t-shirt slogans

The history of the t-shirt slogan goes back to the first half of the 20th century. US colleges used to sign their property, especially clothing. College athletic departments stencilled their t-shirts with phrases like *Property of Virginia Tech.*,⁴ thus indicating not only the owner of the t-shirt but also the membership of its wearer. Today, many t-shirts imitate this kind of slogan, using names of fictitious associations. As far as we know, the first t-shirt slogan expressing an attitude was produced in the USA in 1948. Supporters of the presidential candidate Thomas E. Dewey were provided with a t-shirt saying *Dew it with Dewey*. This idea was taken up in 1952 by Dwight Eisenhower's party which came up with the catchy slogan *I like Ike*. The newly-discovered advertising method gained ground in the 1950s and companies used slogans on t-shirts to make them more attractive as a souvenir. The 1960s' peace movement discovered the t-shirt as a medium for political statements. The effects of this development are still to be felt today. In recent years it has become *en vogue* for celebrities to display political statements at public events.⁵ In the 1980s and 1990s t-shirts with bold brand names, including the names of music bands, have been popular. This kind of 'labelling' was closely connected to a feeling of prestige. Since the late 1990s, slogans with a tendency to the humorous have become fashionable.⁶ Today, you can easily print your own t-shirt and 'label' yourself with a message which serves your purposes best.⁷

The multiple forms that are taken by phrases on t-shirts make it almost impossible to talk of *the* language of t-shirt slogans. In the following, we will try to provide an insight into the linguistic problems which are presented by t-shirt slogans.

⁴ Example taken from Paul Collins, *Tee Season: You cool kids are all wearing those zany shirts? How quaint*, 22 August 2005, The Village Voice, 4 June 2006
<<http://www.villagevoice.com/nyclife/0534,essay,67069,15.html>>.

⁵ One of the most energetic t-shirt protesters is the actor Viggo Mortensen. He repeatedly occurred at public events wearing handwritten messages on his t-shirt, among them slogans expressing bold criticism of the Bush administration such as *No more Blood for Oil* or *War is not the answer*.

⁶ In fact, Paul Collins suggests that the tradition of the humorous slogan goes back to the 19th century. According to Collins, the Chicago Tribune from June 10, 1897 features an article about a young gentleman who wrote the words *There are no Flies on me* on his shirt front. Cf. Collins, *Tee Season* <<http://www.villagevoice.com/nyclife/0534,essay,67069,15.html>>.

⁷ A search for „t-shirt slogans“ in the online search engine *Google* produces hundreds of websites dedicated to providing the customer with the most brilliant, funny, and exciting t-shirt slogan in the world.

Probably the most basic question is how to treat t-shirt slogans linguistically since the answer to this question will determine the analytical approach. Are slogans on t-shirts to be considered as a text? One would certainly agree that the following example can be considered a proper text at least formally:

*Flowers burst from a surreal landscape
Little water droplets like fireworks explode!
like fireworks explode in the sky, shining like stars.
Where is this place?
I don't know...maybe paradise
Feels like a thousand unseen eyes are watchin'
whilst swirling forms caress your soft skin
It was li[?]e!*

But what about a simple noun phrase like *Western Girl*? Is it to be considered as a text? The first example fulfils the general expectation that texts consist of a series of sentences. Beaugrande/ Dressler mention seven textual criteria all of which have to be fulfilled to constitute a text. These criteria are: cohesion, coherence, intentionality, acceptability, informativity, situationality, intertextuality.⁸ Of these textual criteria, the criterion of coherence has been least debated. Linguists agreed that the criterion of coherence would be sufficient to constitute a text. But this does not answer for borderline cases. According to Beaugrande/ Dressler's definition, one-word utterances like *Help!* would not be texts although they have a clear communicative function (and thus meet the criterion of intentionality), fit in a situation, are produced in a way which is understandable and acceptable by the recipients, and are highly informative. But a single-word utterance can hardly have cohesion or coherence.

In this essay we will adopt a wider text notion which has been formulated by Brinker. Brinker's text concept is more communicatively oriented. He has defined texts as a limited series of linguistic signs which signal a communicative function, thus including one-word utterances (both written and oral) and texts consisting only of one sentence as potential texts.⁹ Following this text notion, t-shirt slogans have a textual character since they undeniably consist of linguistic signs and fulfil a communicative function.

⁸ Cf. Robert-A. de Beaugrande and Wolfgang U. Dressler, *Einführung in die Textlinguistik* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1981) 3.

⁹ Cf. Klaus Brinker, *Linguistische Textanalyse: Eine Einführung in Grundbegriffe und Methoden* (Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 1988) 17.

Even a simple noun phrase like *Western Girl* can be analysed with respect to basic communicative requirements as they are summed up in the Lasswell formula: “*Who* is saying *what* by *what* means to *whom* with *what* effect?”¹⁰

But the phenomenon of t-shirt slogans presents a problem concerning the definition of the sender (the *who* in Lasswell’s formula) since the text is not produced by the person who wears the t-shirt. Nevertheless, the wearer has to be considered as the primary sender¹¹ since he or she is the user of the utterance. The company which has actually produced the text, does not participate in the communicative action, but rather makes the message available to other people. Therefore, the communicative structure of t-shirt slogans would look like this: The wearer (sender) displays a message (writing on a t-shirt) to a receiver (any person looking at the t-shirt) in an optical, i.e. graphical way. We will now have to ask which kinds of messages are conveyed. For the following classification, we have to bear in mind that the slogans analysed largely depend on fashion. Potential senders can only choose from a limited range of messages which is probably rather suited to express a general zeitgeist than an individual personality.

For the following classification of t-shirt slogans Große’s classification of propositional types was adapted. Große distinguishes three types of propositions: the *SELF proposition* (self-referential), the *YOU proposition* (referring to a communicative partner), and the *X proposition* (referring to any other concept).¹² The first two propositional types will be adopted mainly unchanged. Große’s third category will have to be split up in two classes of strategies with different functions. The main propositional strategies of t-shirt slogans found in Jena in June 2006 can be classified as follows:

¹⁰ Cf. “Communication model”, *Routledge Dictionary of Language and Linguistics*. 1996 ed.

¹¹ *Primary sender* is a term taken from research of advertising language. Cf. Nina Janich, *Werbesprache: Ein Arbeitsbuch* (Tübingen: Narr, 2001) 35.

¹² Cf. Ernst Ulrich Große, *Text und Kommunikation: Eine linguistische Einführung in die Funktionen der Texte* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1976) 14ff. Große’s classification is embedded in an analysis of the semantic sentence. He dissects semantic sentences into a metapositional basis, e.g. *I state that...* and an actual proposition, e.g. *t-shirt slogans are a fascinating topic* (my example, J.B.). In the case of t-shirt slogans, the metapositional basis is provided (nonverbally) by the fact that the proposition is written on someone’s chest.

- a) The self-referential strategy (following Große's first category). Self-referential slogans often take the form of simple noun phrases, thus functioning as a kind of 'self-labelling'. A phrase like *Rock Groupie* will necessarily be related to the wearer of the t-shirt and will be interpreted as an (ironic) self-comment. Self-referential function can also be ascribed to complex adjective phrases like *Too cute 2 dance*. Phrases like this can syntactically function as complements of a link verb and thus be interpreted as a completion of the distinctively self-referential sentence "I am...".
- b) The addressing strategy (*YOU proposition*). Addressing slogans refer to the person looking at the t-shirt. Since they have an appeal character, they often take the form of requests (e.g. *Turn this way*) or questions (e.g. *Looking for a Party?*). More seldom, statements about the potential receiver can be found, e.g. *I'm Hot You're Not*. Sometimes addressing slogans play with the multitude of potential opposites. A t-shirt saying *Forever Yours* to everybody takes an additional ironic turn. In general, addressing slogans show a tendency towards making fun of the receiver or even insulting him or her.
- c) The mock-advertising (a subcategory of the *X proposition*). This slogan imitates the mode of advertising media, using a fake company or society name as a head line, e.g. *Welcome Casino Beach Club*. Like real advertisements, they often use adverbial phrases naming a fictitious year of foundation to imitate the legitimating strategy of companies. As an example, one could name the phrase *London Plantations since 1956*. Occasionally, mock-advertising slogans announce a fictitious or past event, as in the slogan *Fun Fair Hartlepool Arcades Showtime Starts Aug 13th – Sep 21st*.
- d) The atmosphere-creating strategy. Slogans of this kind often consist of single phrases or clusters of phrases which have no obvious cohesive connection. Often, certain concepts are evoked by naming activities (*Cruising the Ocean*) or feelings (*The Feeling of Nature*).

Atmosphere-creating slogans tend to be organized around a central noun phrase which is the semantic head of the text, as the noun phrase *True Love* in the slogan *True Love Still Dream True Love Never Dies*. Some of these slogans show a tendency towards the nonsensical, as can be illustrated by this remarkable example:

The Lust Adventure
PIRACY
Hostile Takeover without the paperwork

Formally, texts on t-shirts have the common feature of relative shortness which is reflected in the term slogan. A slogan is defined as the central statement of an advertisement which summarises the contents of the ad.¹³ Janich points out that the main function of the slogan is to contribute to the image of a product or a company.¹⁴ One could assume that slogans on t-shirts are used in the same way, namely to create a certain image. We will later illustrate that this explanation is highly problematic, at least for German ‘users’ of t-shirt slogans.

In order to find out which semantic importance can be ascribed to texts on t-shirts, we will have to ask for the basic text functions fulfilled by the text type t-shirt slogan. In his organon model of language, Bühler distinguishes three basic linguistic functions: the representative function, the expressive function, and the appealing function.¹⁵ Linguistic signs can be used as “symbols” of outer reality (representative function), as “signal” appealing to the recipient (appealing function), or - which is most interesting in this context - as a “symptom” of the sender’s inner reality. Although individual texts can take the character of an appeal (e.g. *Turn this way*), the text type t-shirt slogan is basically meant to fulfil an expressive function.

But what is it that people want to express by ‘labelling’ themselves? Major tendencies of today’s slogan-wearing behaviour are the display of humour and the confession of a political attitude. In both cases, the slogan seems to be intended as a statement about the wearer’s character and attitude.

¹³ Manuela Baumgart, *Die Sprache der Anzeigenwerbung: Eine linguistische Analyse aktueller Werbeslogans* (Heidelberg: Physica, 1992) 35f.

¹⁴ Janich 48.

¹⁵ Karl Bühler, *Sprachtheorie: Die Darstellungsfunktion der Sprache* (Stuttgart, Fischer, 1965) 28ff.

Following this obvious interpretation, the online encyclopaedia *Wikipedia* characterises t-shirts as “a medium for self-expression and advertising”.¹⁶ The conclusion that slogans on t-shirts necessarily refer to the wearer of the t-shirt and have a self-expressive function is of a striking logic. Nevertheless, this explanation does not apply to the situation in Germany. The relation of sender and message is disturbed by special circumstances in Germany which will be discussed in the following.

¹⁶ “T-Shirt”, *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopaedia*, 5 June 2006 <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/T-shirt>>.

3 The phenomenon of semantic distance

The main disruptive element is the fact that almost all slogans found in Jena were written in English although none of them was produced by a company which belongs to the Anglophone speech community. English has the status of a world language. It is the *lingua franca* of economy, science, and popular culture and takes an enormous influence on various national languages. To protect their language against foreign, namely Anglo-american influence, the French government has introduced the *Loi Toubon* which is meant to prevent the over-use of Anglicisms.¹⁷ In Germany, there is no law for the protection of the German language against foreign influence, but in recent years language critics and semi-scholarly language purists have warned against an increasing ‘anglisation’, or rather ‘americanisation’, of the German language. Language purist societies like the *Verein Deutsche Sprache e.V.* condemn the intrusion of English words into the German language as some kind of language pollution.¹⁸

In opposition to language purist associations who depict the situation as an invasion of English into German, Peter von Polenz has repeatedly stressed the fact that linguistic influence is neither a natural phenomenon nor a military takeover. He points out that language change only takes place if it is carried out by speakers. The receiving speech community, in this case the German speech community, for some reasons embraces another language.¹⁹ In Germany, the willingness to adopt the English language is particularly strong among young people. English enjoys an enormous popularity as a ‘lifestyle language’. German radio stations and music television channels almost exclusively play Anglophone music. Only in recent years, the German language has started to be accepted again as a language which is fit for music. Collective consciousness in Germany seems to cling to the idea that somehow things sound silly if you say them in German.²⁰

¹⁷ By the introduction of the *Loi Toubon* in 1994 the use of French became obligatory for advertisement, congresses, etc. It also affected the percentage of French music played on the radio.

¹⁸ For the guidelines of the *Verein Deutsche Sprache e.V.* cf. <www.vds-ev.de>.

¹⁹ Cf. Peter von Polenz, *Deutsche Sprachgeschichte vom Spätmittelalter bis zur Gegenwart. Vol. III. 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Berlin /New York: De Gruyter, 1999) 289.

²⁰ The German band Tocotronic pointedly remarks on the limited applicability of the German language in music: “Über Sex kann man nur auf Englisch singen/ Allzu leicht kanns im Deutschen peinlich klingen.” (on the 1995 album *Digital ist besser*).

English has the image of a ‘cool’ language which almost magically upvalues ordinary discourse. In his book on the situation of the German language, Zimmer remarks:

Since the end of World War Two, America is the leading culture, and that’s it. [...] As a leading culture, it appears modern, dynamic, young, lively, vigorous, sexy, and so does its vocabulary. Magically, its words are imparting these qualities to the things they signify. [...]. More than any necessity or advantageousness of English terms this is the main motivation of the linguistic change towards English, and this is exactly the reason why it cannot be stopped. (my translation, J.B.).²¹

On the whole, the anti-Anglicism campaign of language purist societies has not have much effect on the image of English in Germany. The mass media produce new English-based expressions almost every day. A recent example is the linguistic trend of ‘pimperitis’ in German youth language.²² Triggered by the MTV series *Pimp my ride*, the phrase *to pimp* has gained an amazing popularity and is used in various bizarre combinations with German words. For reasons of ironic distortion, typically German composite nouns are used.²³

One has to state that the predominance of the English language in popular culture is not an exclusively German phenomenon. In Asia, English is even more a matter of prestige than it is in Germany. Asian popular culture and advertisement uses the English language as an exotic design element. The foreign alphabet causes misunderstandings and misspellings, and as these are reproduced they result in grammatically and lexically doubtful, sometimes even absurd messages.²⁴ The prestige effect of nonsensical messages is pointedly commented by Bill Bryson in his book *Mother Tongue*.

²¹ Dieter Zimmer, *Deutsch und anders: Die Sprache im Modernisierungsfieber* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1997) 27f.

²² The term *pimperitis* was coined in Frank Irmscher, “*Pimp my...church? Wie sich der Titel einer TV-Show in eine Phrase verwandelte*“, *Linga et opinio: Studentische Zeitschrift für Sprache und Kommunikation*, 13 June 2006
<http://www.tu-chemnitz.de/phil/leo/rahmen.php?seite=r_kult/irmscher_pimpmychurch.php>.

²³ Hearing example: “Pimp my Bausparvertrag!” It is to be added that Advertisement makes excessive use of the linguistic trend of constructing English phrases with a German object, as can be seen in the *Coca-Cola* ad on occasion of the FIFA World Cup. It addresses the viewer with the bilingual slogan *It’s your Heimspiel!*

²⁴ A stereotypical example is the sentence “All your base are belong to us” which occurred in the Japanese video game *Zero Wing* and has reached a rather unflattering popularity as trash icon.

Bryson states that “products are deemed to be more exciting if they carry English messages even when, as often happens, the messages don’t make a lot of sense.”²⁵ Of course, the linguistic difference between Asian languages and English is much bigger than between English and German. Nevertheless, German ‘users’ of English messages show a tendency to neglect the meaning of the statements which are printed on their t-shirts. This behaviour shows a similarity to the Asian treatment of English words as graphic design elements. Asking students in Jena about the slogans on their t-shirts often produces the following answer: “I did not buy it for the slogan, but I do not mind it. “ Sometimes, wearers do not even know the exact meaning of the slogans they are displaying. A girl whose t-shirt was saying *Pick Me Up* was convinced she would ask the person looking at her chest simply to take her home.

It has become clear that German wearers do not necessarily identify with the ‘message’ on their t-shirts any more. Although they would probably not wear a slogan which they regard as inappropriate, their behaviour does not show the amount of self-expression one would expect. The fact that the ‘pseudo-messages’ on t-shirts are written in a foreign language, as global as it may be, seems to create a distance to the semantic content of the slogans. Taking into account a puzzling slogan like *First Love Wishes School Time Desire In my Heart*, it is to be doubted whether a speaker of German would buy a t-shirt saying the same thing in his or her native language. A slogan in German would have a far greater identificatory impact. The phenomenon of semantic distance can also be observed in the context of contemporary popular music played in Germany which has mainly English lyrics. Even for people who can understand English quite well, it is possible to listen to Anglophone music and sing along without having to mind about the semantic contents. As words on t-shirt turn into mere graphemes, words in songs become empty phonemes for young people in Germany.

²⁵ Bill Bryson, *Mother Tongue: The English Language* (London: Penguin Books, 1990) 173.

4 The other side of linguistic globalisation? Concluding remarks

It has been shown that the regular communicative features of the text type t-shirt slogan are undermined by the discrepancy between native language and global language of popular culture. Wearers of English t-shirt slogans in Germany experience a phenomenon of semantic distance to the words they display. Although most young people in Germany are familiar with the English language, it is possible for them to neglect the meaning of English words and use them as fashionable phrases merely. English slogans seem to show a tendency to be ‘graphemised’, i.e. to be reduced to mere graphemes. One could ask whether the relation of young Germans to English t-shirt slogans reveals the other side of the success of English as a world language.

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2 <http://www.tu-chemnitz.de/phil/leo/rahmen.php?seite=r_kult/irmscher_pimpmychurch.php>.

Appendix

T-shirt slogans collected in June 2006 in Jena, Germany

Slogan	Shop
Adventure 82 Is This All? Girls Department	Pimkie
Athletic Division	H&M
BERRY DELIGHT	H&M
Bling it on	New Yorker
Capito Super Story	Colosseum
Cruising the Ocean	New Yorker
Dangerous Island	Pimkie
Don't break my head	Found
Essence of chic	New Yorker
Falcana 47-05 NW Tigers	H&M
First Love Wishes School Time Desire In my Heart	Colosseum
Flowers burst from a surreal landscape Little water droplets like fireworks explode! like fireworks explode in the sky, shining like stars. Where is this place? I don't know... maybe paradise Feels like a thousand unseen eyes are watchin' whilst swirling forms caress your soft skin It was lir(?)e!	New Yorker
Forever Yours	New Yorker
FunFair - Hartlepool Arcades Showtime Starts Aug 13th – Sep 21st	Found
Funky Bride Hot Affair	New Yorker
GO AHEAD MAKE DAY! Do you feel lucky?	New Yorker
Green Island Beach	H&M
I Don't like Monday	Pimkie
I'M HOT YOU'RE NOT	New Yorker
It's my destiny being Young and Famous	New Yorker
Kapau Beach Surfing Champs	H&M
Kiss A Supercilious Smile Snooty	H&M
London Plantations since 1956	New Yorker
Looking for a Party?	New Yorker
LOREDA Buckaroo: a cowboy from the Great Basin country of northern Nevada, southern Idaho, northeast California and southeastern Oregon. Often wear flat hats, chinks, and ride A-fork saddles with post horns and bucking rolls.	Found
Nobody's perfect But Me	New Yorker

Oakridge 52 Sports Division Re-Union Benefit Meet Center of Excellence	H&M
Pick Me Up	Found
Positive The Secret	Pimkie
Powered by angry minds	Found
Rock Angels	Pimkie
Rock Groupie	Pimkie
Rock is the slogan for wild girls	New Yorker
Rock&Roll Heaven Playin' Sweet Music	Found
Sausalito Martini Club Americas Cup of the Year 1954 Organized in California	Second Hand
Superlucky Happy Girl	New Yorker
Take My Heart	Pimkie
The Beatingds will continue	Pimkie
The Feeling of Nature	Colosseum
The Great Sporting Camp Association Cayman Islands 1974	H&M
The Lust Adventure PIRACY Hostile Takeover without the paperwork	Pimkie
Too Cute 2 Dance	New Yorker
Trash Punk	New Yorker
True Love Still Dream True Love Never Dies	Colosseum
Turn this Way (written upside down)	H&M
Two-fish	Found
Vegas Lights Hotel Casino Hotel Casino	H&M
Welcome Casino Beach Club	Pimkie
Welcome! Sky-lit Motel We're open 24-7	H&M
Western Girl	Pimkie
What was your name?	New Yorker

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