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The study of the perception of code-switching to English in German advertising

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Abstract

This paper highlights the increasing role of code-switching to English in the context of global transformations and focuses on its symbolic usage in German advertising discourse. A survey conducted among the German-speaking community was aimed at finding out what socio-cultural values English conveys and how native speakers perceive the presence of English-inserted elements in an advertisement. The findings show that code-switching to English is considered a complex phenomenon that has both positive and negative aspects, which testifies to its ambiguous axiological status.

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1. Introduction

The study of code-switching, which is understood as the practice of switching between two or more languages within a single utterance, provides insight into the specific character of the modern sociolinguistic situation and helps reveal major trends and directions of linguistic changes in the era of globalization.

The phenomenon of code-switching is the focus of attention of different areas of linguistic research such as psycholinguistics (Meuter, 2005), sociolinguistics (Androutsopoulos, 2012), linguistic anthropology (Heller, 1995; Woolard, 1985), as well as ethnolinguistics (Bucholtz and Hall, 2004; Le Page and Tabouret-Keller, 1985; Piller, 2001; Rubin, 1995; Pavlenko and Blackledge, 2006). Language alternation occurs in various types of discursive

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practices, both oral and written. Advertising, which is a site of language contact is gaining importance in the contemporary globalized world. Ingrid Piller observes that “multilingualism has started to become a major phenomenon in the language of advertising and will undoubtedly continue to expand” (Piller, 2003, pp. 170-171).

According to T. Vestergaard and K. Schröder (1985), advertisers use the resources of the language with the purpose of attracting people’s attention and persuading them to act as consumers. Language is a flexible and convincing means that can be employed as a contextualizing and signaling mechanism conveying cultural specificity (Kelly-Holmes, 2005, p. 11). As long as any advertisement presupposes a well thought-out choice of lexical units (Holmes, 1992), code-switching is functionally motivated and represents a meaningful discursive, morphological, and stylistic device. It performs a referential function (Knospe, 2007) and is used as an advertising technique due to the symbolic and economic value of language in the context of globalization (Heller, 1995). Not only does it communicate the subject matter of a message, but also expresses social and semantic meaning (Eastman, 1992). As Monica Heller points out, “Code-switching is thus a form of language practice in which individuals draw on their linguistic resources to accomplish conversational purposes; those resources have value in the terms of various existing marketplaces” (Heller, 1995, p. 161).

Linguistic research confirms that a considerable number of advertisements worldwide employ the English language as a means of addressing target audiences (Bhatia, 2000; Martin, 2010; Hashim, 2010). Throughout the years, English has become “the international language of advertising and consumerism” (Graddol, 2000, p. 7). The studies of code-switching in non-European contexts (Myers-Scotton, 1993; Romaine, 1989), as well as the studies of the world’s variants of English (Kachru, 1990) have repeatedly demonstrated that English serves as a European and international lingua franca.

English comes into contact with a number of European languages. In “A Dictionary of European Anglicisms”, Manfred Görlach gives a comparative analysis of the integration of Anglicisms into 16 European languages, including German. The dictionary provides “[A] provisional snapshot of the situation as it presented itself in the early 1990” (Görlach, 2001, p. xv). The process of borrowing English words is rather complex, as “[t]he degree and speed of integration depends not only on the structure of the two languages involved, but [...] individual items exhibit different stages of integration on different levels” (Görlach, 2003, p. 10).

Thus, English has become an indispensable part of advertising discourse not only in bilingual but also in monolingual countries such as Germany. Code-switching to English serves as a marker of new ways of international interaction and is widely adopted as a universal linguistic tendency. The abundance of instances of code-switching to English in German advertising is closely connected with its unique status of the language of modern technology and international communication, as well as with associations, connotations, images, and socio-psychological effects it creates (Bhatia and Ritchie, 2004). The effectiveness of this technique largely depends on what socio-cultural concepts it activates and thus how consumers generally perceive it.

2. Survey

Code-switching to English is typical of adverts that can be found in a variety of spheres, including fashion, travelling, the service industry, food, technology, leisure, business, everyday life, luxury goods, medicine, goods for children, etc. In order to determine which image it constructs and what symbolic values are attached to English-inserted elements in a German advertising message, a survey was conducted. The survey involved 153 German-speaking people aged 19-86. The respondents were asked to express their attitude to the following advertising slogan: *Solar is future – willkommen in unserer Gegenwart!* (Solar is future – welcome to our present!)

Table 1. Questionnaire.

1.	Which advertisement attracts your attention?	1)	First
	a) Solar is future – willkommen in unserer Gegenwart!	2)	Second
	b) Solar ist Zukunft – willkommen in unserer Gegenwart!	3)	Both
2.	What is your attitude to the presence of the English inserted elements in the first message?	1)	Rather positive
		2)	Rather negative

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