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Love expression in the United States and Germany

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ABSTRACT

The study had the goal to compare love expression in the United States and Germany. The data offer insight into love expression as a cultural script and symbol of culture change, suggesting competing ways of using the locution "I love you" in the two cultures. Not only is verbal love expression less central in Germany, but for the German, the locution "I love you" is traditionally reserved for private disclosure of a formal love, governed by a communal imperative for feelings of meaningfulness. This is juxtaposed with an American desire for disclosing love in expressive ways and in a broad range of contexts, including nonromantic relationships. Globalization issues, such as the universal (expressive culture) versus the particular (reserved culture), are evoked, and the spreading in Germany of an expressive culture across a variety of settings suggested. Spurred by the use of telecommunication technology and often met with resistance, the tensions arising from these semantic and pragmatic changes in the use of love expression represent one of the interesting aspects of this paper.

1. Introduction

In an exhibit on the history of love letters (Museum for Communication, Nuremberg, Germany, 14 February–26 August 2007), a banner spanning the length of a wall listed love expressions in a variety of languages. The German section featured 14 expressions, most of them in dialect form:

> Ick heb die leev (East Frisian), Ik hald fan die (Frisian), Ik heew de liif (Frisian), Ik hon fan dei (Frisian), Ick liebe dir (Berlin dialect), Ich liebe dich (standard German), Isch habb disch libb (Hessian), Du gfällsd mer fai (Franconian), Isch hann disch lieb (Saarland dialect), Ich hoan dich geer (Alsatian), Isch liebdsch (Saxon), I lieb die (Bavarian), I mog di ganz arg (Swabian), I stand total uf di (Vorarlberg dialect).

Translated into English, the expressions range from "I hold you dear," "I am fond of you," "I like you" to "I love you." The list is somewhat playful and mixes everyday expressions with more exclusive ways of declaring love. Specifically, it does not make apparent that people in the past declared the actual "Ich liebe dich" [I love you] only seldom and only in solemn, romantic contexts, such as marriage proposals. Other forms, like "Ich hab' dich lieb" [I hold you dear] served as love declarations for everyday situations, including nonromantic relationships (e.g., parental, friendship).

Recently, however, a wider spread of "Ich liebe dich" has been reported in Germany—one including nonromantic contexts and approaching the use of the English "I love you" in the United States. The usage change occurred gradually and remained largely under the radar for some time; but when McDonald's launched its *I'm loving it* campaign in Germany in 2003 and

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translated its slogan literally into *Ich liebe es*, awareness of the issue reached critical mass and caused a national debate. Newspapers and magazines, such as the *Tagesspiegel* (Herbst, 2003) and *Spiegel* (Ankenbrand, 2003), commented critically, pointing out that love is an emotion too deep and transcending to be evoked for mundane objects or businesses, like McDonald's. Comparing U.S. and German love expression, Hönicke (2003, para 4) asserts that

> an American is relatively quick in expressing love for profane things and therefore is able to give his/her heart to fast food. The German translation "Ich liebe es," however, is just too strong to be squeezed into a styrofoam box together with a fatty burger.

A few years and more inflationary incidents later, the topic continues to elicit impassioned comments on the degeneration and Americanization of love expression, as the following sardonic entry in a design and marketing blog (Schafrinna, 2007, para 1) illustrates.

> Dear lovers, You have done it. You degraded one of the most meaningful words of our language to a banal commonplace phrase. Whereas Pro7 [a cable TV network] recognizes the superficial nature of love by at least using the English language for its "We love to entertain you" [commercial], . . . the disproportionately stronger expression "Liebe" has made its way into more and more advertising slogans.

A reader responds (Schafrinna, 2007, Comment #22):

> . . . the meaningful word "Liebe" is being rendered harmless, and we don't notice how it creeps in. When it is as superficial as in English, it's too late . . . What, by the way, do Americans say when they want to express that they truly love someone?

2. Literature review

2.1. Angloamericanisms in the German Language

To provide a context for the Americanization of love expression in Germany, it helps to look at the larger influx of Angloamericanisms in the German language. Whether through migration, trade, war, or other encounters, foreign vocabulary—even grammatical features—finds its way into other languages. In the course of history, the German language experienced waves of Latin, Greek, French, and Italian influences in the 17th and 18th century, and more recently an influx of English. In the 19th and early 20th century, English language imports were manageable; since the latter part of the 20th century, however, new English words have been entering the language at such an unprecedented rate that discourse is at times becoming unintelligible to Germans with no or limited English proficiency (in particular, older people without English schooling, young people with less than a higher education, and immigrants from non-English speaking countries) (Zabel, 2001).

The areas most effected by Angloamericanisms are technology, advertising, economy, leisure activities, fashion, and youth culture (Zifonun, 2002). For example, to integrate technological inventions and novelties, modern languages have an extensive need for new vocabulary. Some languages borrow words, others invent their own. In a study comparing European languages on their use of the native language for new computer terminology, for instance, Finnish showed a 93% native rate, French 86%, Polish 82%, Spanish 80%, Swedish 69%, Dutch 68%, Italian 65%, German 57%, and Danish 52% (Zimmer, 1997, p. 48). In other words, Finnish and French have the least amount of English computer jargon; German and Danish are the most angloamericanized.

Everyday German conversations, TV reports, and newspaper articles are not only infused with words for new technology (e.g., *attachment*, *laptop*, *mouse pad*), but also with English words replacing synonymous or near-synonymous German words (e.g., *bike*, *date*, *deadline*, *feeling*, *freelancer*, *lifestyle*) (Junker, 2001; Sick, 2006). In trend-determined areas, such as advertising, fashion, and pop music, sometimes the majority of content words (i.e., meaning-carrying words, such as verbs, nouns, and adjectives) are in English. The following sentence from a fashion magazine is an example: "Der Shootingstar unter den Designern bekam standing Ovations für die super-coolen Outfits mit den trendigen Tops im Relax-Look" [the shooting star among the designers received standing ovations for the super cool outfits with the trendy relax-look tops] (quoted in Zimmer, 1997, p. 21).

The reason for the global influence of English—its worldwide distribution during British colonialism and the importance of U.S. achievements in science, technology, entertainment, and economy, among others—have been discussed widely. There are additional factors, however, that can explain the extraordinary influx of English in Germany: (1) linguistically, English words are often shorter and less cumbersome than German words (e.g., *Campus* for *Hochschulgelände*) (Zifonun, 2002; Zimmer, 1997). (2) Politically, due to its unconditional capitulation at the end of WWII and subsequent institution of the Marshall Plan, Germany lost sovereignty and became dependent on the USA (Stephan, 2006). To this day, U.S. army bases dot the landscape in Germany, creating a presence that is lacking elsewhere. (3) Culturally, the USA became *Leitkultur* after WWII, and as such appears modern, dynamic, young, lively, and appealing (Zimmer, 1997). At the same time as English and U.S. culture rose in importance, Germany experienced an identity crisis. In particular, the desire to avoid anything reminiscent of nationalism affected attitudes toward language and culture in the German speech community (Stark, 2001). Germans often go out of their way to complain about the behaviors or attitudes of their compatriots and blame Germanness for the