Election Poster Busting: Communicative Traces of the Appropriation of Election Posters in Public Space. Case Analyses – Research Questions – Perspectives. A Workshop Report

is thinking about

Sascha Michel, Steffen Pappert & Melani Schröter

This workshop report examines the phenomenon of election poster busting from a media-linguistic perspective. We pursue the hypothesis that multimodal transformations of election posters leave traces of the appropriation of political communication, most of which can be understood as subversive attempts at criticism of the political system and political elites. The article attempts to approach the phenomenon of election poster busting with the concept of communicative constraints and affordances. Election poster busting is therefore a consequence of exploited constraints, which are reinterpreted as affordances. On the basis of three brief examples, we will discuss types and methods of linguistic transformation and re-semiotization. Finally, some open research questions will be presented, as well as perspectives for different levels of analysis.

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1.   Introduction

Election posters belong to the standard text repertoire of parties in election campaigns. Due to their positioning in the public space – often in much frequented places – they give rise to a wide range of appropriations, which are, however, difficult to access for analysis. What do recipients make of the political advertising pursued by these posters? The phenomenon of *busting* can provide us with clues about how posters are perceived, especially when they meet with discord, resulting in subversive forms of appropriation through alienation or transformation of election posters.

The aim of this workshop report is to approach the phenomenon of election billboard busting empirically from a media-linguistic point of view and to introduce an approach to qualitative linguistic research of political guerrilla communication. Our hypothesis is that the alienation of election posters provides an insight into the appropriation of unidirectional, monological political communication because it allows the reconstruction of (subversive) appropriation treatments. Busted election posters constitute a range of excellent examples of non-authoritative (i.e. not relying on author reputation or media attention or distribution) grassroot responses and deconstructions of authoritative political communication.

After a brief linguistic characterization of the text type *election poster*, we will discuss three examples of busted election posters. We will conclude with outlining some open research questions and perspectives arising from our analysis of the three examples.

2.   Text Type *Election Poster*

Election posters are part of the field of political advertising (cf. Girnth 2015). As a text type, which is subject to special space-time restrictions, they show prototypical characteristics as outline in Table 1 (according to Domke 2014; cf. also Pappert 2017b).

The prototypical election poster is perceived visually, whereby the communication direction is unidirectional and monological, i.e. an interaction in the sense of a dialogue is not provided. A producer as a communication partner (usually a politician/party) is faced with a potentially open number of recipients, but this is given by the communi-

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Criteria	Characteristics
mode of perception	visual
communication direction	unidirectional, monological
communication partner	1: n (n fixed location, time restriction)
communication medium	transfer medium with specific duration
media material	immovable or fixed, solid, cardboard/paper
sign system	language, colours, pictures, symbols, etc.
time-boundedness	relatively time-bound, relatively restricted receivable
place-boundedness	place-bound, content possibly exclusive
space generation	restrictedly generatable reception space
recipient profile	moving, standing, (seated) seeing

Table 1

Text Type *Election Poster*

cation space as it were. Election posters are placed on transfer media, which are arranged over a specific period and usually consist of card-board. The messages on election posters can be expressed by means of different sign systems, i.e. language, pictures and symbols, which are often interrelated with each other. Through their place-boundedness, election posters can also be picked up only on a time-and-place basis, in most cases they are received during the execution of further activities (for example, driving) or in passing, such as other signs and texts in the public space (cf. Domke 2014).

Having said this, election posters are also in many cases posted on the relevant parties' homepages and/or social media platforms. The news media will also report about parties' election campaigns and may reproduce posters in print and online news reporting, making them increasingly accessible in a range of different settings and over extended time periods. One could perhaps distinguish between a primary communicative situation for this text type (its materiality as described above, on display in a public space and limited in time to the duration of the campaign) and a secondary, mediatised or virtual communicative context that is reminiscent of the primary communicative situation, but elevates the poster to some extent out of the material as well as space and time limitations of the former.

However, the election poster is a relatively regulated (conservative) text type that hardly allows for variability: it mostly comprises core elements such as a picture of the candidate or motive pictures of the party, a slogan, the party name and, if necessary, optional symbols, icons, intermediary links, hashtags, etc. (cf. Pappert 2016, 2017a, b), which are arranged correspondingly to a seemingly conscious layout ("visual area", cf. Schmitz 2011). However, changes over time suggest that the text type overall is adaptable to changes reflective perhaps of wider developments and trends in (poster) advertising (cf. Schröter 2017). Their function is the service of the "en-passant-reception": little, but memorable text, large pictures, large writing and the creation of "ad-hoc trust" or positive "emotions". This constant pattern makes election posters reliable for producers and recipients and orientation-endowing texts.

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It is precisely these text-type bound characteristics of election posters which as "constraints" actually lead the direction of communication that are often reinterpreted as "affordances"[1], i.e. as communicative options, and also exploited. Communication offers which were originally not included in the text type become imposed from the outside. The following section will provide three examples to illustrate the way in which such resemiotizing methods[2] are specifically manifested and how a media-linguistic approach can be used to describe grassroots appropriation of election posters (see Michel & Pappert, in preparation).

3. Election Poster Busting: Three Case Studies

The *election poster busting* constitutes a form of *adbusting*. The latter refers to the alienation, alteration, and misuse of advertising in public space, and is usually assigned to the communication guerrilla (cf. Beaugrand 2016: 10; Pappert 2017a: 60-63). The demarcation from neighbouring phenomena such as street art, graffiti, and the party strategic, ironic-satirical way of using busting elements in election posters[3] as well as online texts – e.g. the political meme (see Michel 2017) – is fluent.

It is not the aim at this point to provide an art or social science classification of the phenomenon, but to explore the potential of a media-linguistic analysis. Although communication and language, or, more precisely, forms of communication and text types in public spaces – especially in the city – have been increasingly taken into account in linguistics in recent years (cf. Domke 2014; Schmitz & Ziegler 2016), election poster busting has not attracted much attention yet

(exception: Pappert 2017a). The examples below show that more analytical engagement with this phenomenon would be worthwhile.[4]

3.1 Case 1: Satirical-playful Transformation

The majority of the examples in our corpus are based on a playful, satirical-ironic approach to election posters, often with the aim of ridiculing the protagonists. For example, the displayed persons are preferably provided with beards, with the "Hitler beard" clearly dominating (see also case 2), or other aspects of their physical appearance are alienated. In the present example (Figure 1), the name of the candidate is played on using the phonetic-phonological similarity of *Gramling* to the horror figure *Gremlin* of the movie of the same name, and is represented by a change in the materiality of the poster. The image of a gremlin replaces the head of the candidate and the slogan is covered by an orange plastic film.

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[1] "Affordance refers to the characteristics of a cultural tool as perceived and implemented from the perspective of its users. It is about the possibilities of action that a tool opens up for certain users, even if they were not (canonically) provided" (Androutsopoulos 2016: 8, our translation). On the concept of "constraints and affordances" – and, above all, the concept of affordances – cf. also Zillien (2008), Pentzold et al. (2013), Marx & Weidacher (2014).

[2] "Resemiotization means (...) a more or less complex form of meaning constitution in which the modification of already existing signs of any expression is attributed to a different meaning than the original meaning" (Pappert 2017a: 56, our translation).

[3] Thus, the satirical party "The Party" in the Bundestag election campaign 2017 deliberately uses elements of the election poster busting in their own election campaign.

[4] The case studies discussed here come from a corpus accumulated over a period of years, which is to be systematized for further studies.

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Figure 1

Example of Satirical-playful Transformation

At the same time, "material changeability" is the exploited constraint of "material and formal fixation." It can be reinterpreted as an affordance because the material consists of poster card-board. In the case of digital election posters, for example, the materiality would be an invariable constraint. It is striking that the material is colour-matched to the CDU's election poster, so that the alienation effect is not to be expressed in its entirety. The illusion of an authentic election poster is intended to be upheld (which is why the party logo was not removed); much like a parody can only work by retaining recognisable features of the original.

In this example, multimodal transcriptivity (cf. Holly 2009; Jäger 2010) takes place between text and picture, whereby the text (*Gremlin*) makes the picture "read-able" or the picture makes the text "other-wise readable", which adds an additional, perhaps even superposing, satirical reading to the election poster.

3.2 Case 2: Thematic-discursive Transformation

In case 2, the "material and formal fixation" as a constraint of election posters is exploited and reinterpreted as the affordance of "material changeability", while at the same time reinterpreting the sub-affordances "manipulability of pictures" and "graphical deletion of morphemes/words". Figure 2 shows an election poster of the CDU-Germany can be seen, with Chancellor Angela Merkel and the slogan *Gemeinsam erfolgreich* [*Together successful*]. A completely new motif of the poster is created by means of a few uncomplicated surface changes. The painted "Hitler-Beard" (the so-called *hitlerizing*) and the accompanying textual change of the slogan to *mein reich* [*my empire*] is less a satirical than thematic-discursive transformation of the base election poster. Solidarity (*gemeinsam* [*together*]) then suddenly changes to selfishness (*mein* [*my*]), *erfolgreich* (*successful*) becomes reduced to *reich* [*em-*

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pire]. However, the combination of *mein* and *reich* suggests a noun (*Reich*), despite the miniscule.

Figure 2

Example of Thematic-discursive Transformation

Discursively, this change is equally divided: 1. The Hitler- and thus dictator-association takes place pictorially, but above all by the language-structural parallel of *mein reich* [*my empire*] and *mein Kampf* [*my fight*] as well as the NS term *Reich*. This way, the election poster as part of a campaign involving democratic participation through voting be-

comes a call for dictatorship. 2. This is alluded to, at the same time, by the role of the Chancellor – particularly with respect to Europe – as a powerful and enforceable head of state. The so-called Greek crisis is likely to be the main discourse (the poster was published during the Bundestag election campaign in 2013), as Angela Merkel was also compared to Hitler by demonstrators and media in Greece because of the German government's tough austerity politics. Thus, a few tweaks to the poster's surface achieve a thematic change of the election poster (re-semiotization) and thereby a discursive re-anchoring. The original poster and message and hence the communicative intention is still recognisable, but becomes overwritten with an equally recognisable critical deconstruction of this message.

The question is, finally, to what extent the text type *election poster* is still preserved here. Obviously – the same applies for the other case studies, too – the election poster must remain recognizable as a foil, in order for the recipient to be able to perceive the transformations as conscious and external. This means that the targeted "editing" of the poster by a second – but unauthorized – communicator must be directly related to the original poster, and the original text type

must still be recognisable – in order to be able to assess it as a subversive and guerrilla-communicative act.[5] Neither the picture nor the message nor the function are the same as the original, but a second layer of interpretation is laid over the poster, which leads to a hybrid text (cf. Hauser & Luginbühl 2015) and must be taken into account in a text- and discourse-linguistic analysis (cf. Michel & Pappert in preparation).

3.3 Case 3: Successive Transformation

The third case study can be described as a *successive transformation* in that several communicators perform this transformation step by step. As an example, Figure 3 shows a large-scale poster of the SPD-Rhineland-Palatinate, which was set up during the parliamentary election campaign in 2016. The election poster can be described as mini-

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[5] Thus, a distinction is made from "fake election posters", i.e. the deceptively genuine imitation of election posters, which precisely suggest authenticity and make the author of the fake unrecognizable. That is, the tactics of faking plays with the "assignment of author and text" and is especially successful when "no clear relationship between the two is produced" (Autonome a.f.r.i.k.a. Gruppe et al. 2001: 67).

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malistic, which is typical of this election campaign series of the SPD (cf. Pappert 2016): Only a centred high-value word (*Substanz* [*substance*]) is present, otherwise the poster has a lot of free space on a dark turquoise background.

Figure 3

Example of Successive Transformation

Here, two constraints, namely the constraint of "material and formal fixation" and the constraint of "unidirectional and monological communication direction", are exploited and reinterpreted as "affordance for written interaction". This means that the free space of the election poster provides potential for adding external written (interestingly non-pictorial – obviously base

sign systems also control the use of alien sign systems) interaction and thus manipulation. In a first step, this is done by adding the noun *Pack* [*rabble*], which is sprayed in white spray paint (and thus in the same colour as the high-value word) quite directly under *Substanz* [*substance*] and in the name of Governor *Malu Dreyer*. Two things are happening here: Firstly, *Pack* [*rabble*] recalls the discourse surrounding Sigmar Gabriel, who, as an SPD chairman, referred to right-wing radicals in general and right-wing demonstrators around the visit of the refugee camp in Heidenau in particular with "*Das ist Pack* [*This is rabble*]"[6]. The expression was strongly criticized by many sides, since he not only disparages group of people altogether, but also excludes them as "non-discursive" (cf. Scharloth 2015)[7].

Secondly, in the present case the word *Pack* [*rabble*] precisely transcribes the name

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[6] http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/heidenau-sigmar-gabriel-besucht-fluechtlingsunterkunft-a-1049582.html (last access: 21.08.2017).

[7] http://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/frage-des-tages-asylkritiker-mob-oder-pack-was-steckt.2156.de.html?dram:article_id=329241 (last access: 21.08.2017).

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Malu Dreyer[8] and makes it readable in a different way by means of this discourse knowledge, in that it is almost like a boomerang on the leading edge of the SPD, in that it is now the SPD and/or their candidate Malu Dreyer that are denounced as *Pack*.

In a second step, another communicator, apparently more sympathetic to the SPD, comes into play, which can be recognized by the fact that (s)he is spraying – in orange[9] – a *t* behind *Pack* as well as a *DAS* [*it*] with exclamation marks, so that the noun *Pack* [*rabble*] suddenly turns to an either imperative optative *Packt das!* [*make it!*] (and probably refers to the election victory of the SPD); or, if referred to Malu Dreyer, an indicative 3rd person singular (*Malu Dreyer (will) make(s) it!*).

From an SPD point of view, the initially negative reshape results in a positive reshape, but with smears: The first transformation step is still clearly visible by the white colour (i.e. it is not painted orange,

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[8] According to Kress & van Leeuwen (1996) such differences in saliency are therefore quite social-semiotically relevant.

[9] This is the party colour of the CDU. According to an objective-hermeneutic reading, the goal could be to deliberately locate the identity of the originator in this direction, thus luring the recipient to a false track.

which would be possible), the positive re-interpretation should be recognizable and reconstructible as such. Thus, complex partial interactions arise: firstly (mono-logically) between party and recipient, secondly (dialogically) between secondary communicator and party / recipient, and thirdly (dialogic) between tertiary communicator and party / recipient / secondary communicator. The recipient plays a role in all partial interactions, since it is a matter of public political communication, which – even if apparently between two interactants – is always staged, but at least to be interpreted as multi-addressed (cf. Kühn 1995).

4. Open (Research) Questions and Perspectives

The case studies illustrate that a media-linguistic approach to forms of election poster busting is useful for describing and revealing the complex multimodal structures, references, and interactions of a text type in public space – and this as a subversive[10] act beyond a frequently criti-

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[10] Subversive means that the transformations of election posters are carried out with the aim of criticizing political elites and the political system.

cized Vandalism or the destruction of election posters.

In the following, some open questions and perspectives of a linguistically grounded research of the election poster busting are to be listed.

4.1 Micro Level

➢ With which semiotic resources (for example sign systems) are transformation processes carried out?

➢ How are these multimodally related? Can transcriptive processes be perceived?

➢ Which thematic, pragmatic, and discursive changes lead to resemiotization processes?

➢ How can linguistic categories/types of transformation be described and differentiated?

➢ Which inherent affordances of the text type *election poster* are used, which constraints are redistributed and "exploited" to affordances?

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➢ Can the different hybridizations from donor and target poster be systematized?

➢ Quantitative enhancements of qualitative research: Which categories/types are frequent or rare?

4.2   Meso Level

➢ Are complex interactions visible in the form of dialogues? How are they structured and between which actors do they take place?

➢ How can the redesigned election posters be described as a text (type) linguistically? Are they new texts, variants of texts, or are they part of a text family? What consequences are then to be drawn for the binarity of the text-type-defining criteria of election posters (e.g. materiality, monologicity)?

➢ How can communicators, text products and recipients be linked, in the sense of a holistic media-cultural-linguistic approach (cf. Klemm & Michel 2014)

and related theoretically and methodically to each other in research, and what are the implications for adjusting the active (producer) and passive (recipient) paradigm on the basis of such empirical examples?

➢ To what extent does the internet (for example social networks) allow conclusions to be drawn here on communicator and recipient reactions, for example, when politicians forward pictures of their transformed election posters to their followers?

➢ To what extent are pictures of original election posters and of manipulated fakes spread over news media and social networks? What are the linguistic differences / similarities to authentic and transformed election posters in the sense of busting?

➢ To what extent do manipulations rely on intertextuality (posters as part of the wider election campaign that comprises a range of media and political text types) and/or on knowledge about/critical stance regarding broader political and discursive contexts?

4.3   Macro Level

➢ To what extent can linguistic transformation processes be described as subversive in the political sense, and what conclusions can be drawn about the appropriation of politics – for example, by means of appropriation activities (see Klemm 2000)?

➢ How is this theoretically located, e.g. in the framework of Cultural Studies (cf. de Certeau 1988), the communication guerrilla (cf. for example Eco 1967/1985) or protest linguistics (cf. Kämper & Wengeler 2017)?

➢ What theoretical and methodological consequences follow for the research of public communication in general and communication in urban spaces in particular?

➢ What distinctions to neighbouring phenomena (such as street art, graffiti, meme) arise from a linguistic point of view?

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> Contrast comparison with other languages and countries: Are there cultural differences and peculiarities, or is the election poster busting a transcultural phenomenon?

> To what extent can the findings be fed back to the actors (communicators) in the sense of an "applied politolinguistics"?

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