Language and Intercultural Communication Problems

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Abstract

Intercultural communication problems can occur as a result of the interaction between people from different cultures. This article describes the difficulties encountered within the German speech communities after unification in 1989. These two speech communities, although sharing a language, found that the separation of the countries led to unexpected problems in unified Germany. Language was being used both consciously and subconsciously to emphasise perceived and real problems and to illustrate group identity and this was hampering the building of new relationships.

For the success of an enlarged European Union, which is resulting in ever-closer European integration, intercultural communication is essential. However, communication problems regularly occur when people from two different cultures interact. Often, but not always, this is a result of people belonging to different speech communities. This paper makes a contribution towards solving intercultural communication problems by presenting a case study of these issues. It focuses on the difficulties which occurred within the German speech communities after unification in 1989. It could be argued that this refers to intra-cultural rather than inter-cultural communication, because the problems appeared within one culture. However, as will be shown, the populations of the two German states were physically separated for a long period of time which gave rise to two different cultures which happened to share the 'same' language[1]. When the two were unified after the fall of the Berlin Wall, they discovered that although sharing a language, a substantial number of words had different meanings within each group which, to the present day, give rise to problems and disputes.

As Battle has argued, speech, language and communication are all embedded aspects of culture (Battle 1998: 3). We cannot understand communication taking place within a culture or cultures without understanding the cultural and ethnographic factors that are involved in this process. Culture, Battle writes, is not only about the "behaviour, beliefs and values of a group of people who are brought together by the commonality" (Battle 1998:3), but also about self-perception as we are able to view our own world through language and society. Furthermore, when considering cultural identity we also have to review language because both influence each other (Richardson 2001: 42). Different cultures coming together has been the focus of past research throughout many different fields of study: not only linguistics, but also historically and within anthropology. It has sometimes been assumed that people living within one country are similar enough to make communication possible, but by looking at the German situation we can see that this is not necessarily the case. Initially it may seem that adjustment would be easier if people speak the same language, but this can be deceptive (and the German case study is an excellent example of this). In fact, people

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[1] By the same language, I am referring here to German as a national language with different local varieties that were used within the two German states. Much research has been carried out examining the different varieties of German both before and after 1989 and some of these will be mentioned when looking specifically at examples within German.

speaking the same language may find it difficult to adjust as differences can be harder to perceive and similarities may be imagined. When different groups encounter one another, a common problem is that people think differently (Singer 1998: 41). An aspect of this issue is that when we come across people who have different values, we have to re-evaluate ourselves again too. The result of such evaluations can be that the speakers will actually tend to communicate less in an attempt to avoid any awkward occurrences. To understand such problems we have to be able to work out where the breakdowns are likely to occur and what can be done to protect against them. Looking at the situation in Germany since the fall of the Wall in 1989 illustrates this vividly.

German unification in 1990 brought together two German-speaking populations which for the previous 45 years had been establishing different and often opposing political systems, economies, social organisations and cultural institutions. Although separation was never complete, communication between the two populations was severely hampered. As a result of separate political, economic, social and cultural developments, and the lack of communication, changes occurred in the German language which were specific to each of these populations. These changes came to light in language and intercultural communication problems after 1989, notably when the citizens of the former East and West Germanies were forced to confront each other after years of segregation[2].

Separation had started at the end of the Second World War when the borders of the German state were changed, resulting in an extensive population displacement, and the country was divided into four occupation zones. In the late 1940s the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) was formed in the three western zones, occupied by the United States of America, the United Kingdom and France. The German Democratic Republic (GDR) was established in the zone occupied by the Soviet Union. The former capital of Germany, Berlin, situated entirely within the Soviet occupation zone, was divided into four zones and subsequently into two parts, one associated with the west, while the other part became the capital of the GDR. Both Germanies were accorded full sovereignty in 1955. The Berlin Wall, erected in 1961 to stop the population flow to the West, symbolised the separation of the two Germanies with their different political, economic, social and cultural systems. This separation lasted until 1989 when many citizens of the GDR demonstrated against the leading political party and demanded free elections, culminating, rather suddenly, in the fall of the Wall on the night of 9 November 1989. The full (re)unification of the two German states took place on 3 October 1990, a date which is officially known as Unification Day (*Tag der deutschen Einheit*). The words 'unification' and 'reunification' are in themselves important markers which can be used to emphasize political opinion. Using the term 'reunification' suggests that something is going back to the way it was before, which is a very complex situation in Germany[3].

The political systems in the German states had been entirely different in the two German states. The FRG was a pluralist multi-party confederation of *Länder* (states), with a central parliament in Bonn and *Länder* parliaments chosen through free elections. Under control of the USSR, the GDR was a totalitarian single-party state with only minor satellite parties. The leading East German party was the *Sozialistische*

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[2] In order to avoid confusion, I will refer to the two German states as East and West German when referring to the pre-1989 situation and as east and west German for present day references. This follows the convention set by Stevenson and Theobald (2000).

[3] Herberg et al. (1997) illustrate the different connotations of the terms referring to unification and how these terms were used in Germany to describe the situation both in a neutral, as well as a politically loaded way.

Einheitspartei Deutschlands (SED). Both states were part of wider international networks: the FRG was in the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and became a founder member of the European Economic Community, while the GDR was in the Warsaw Pact and Comecon. Relations between the two states were tense in the 1960s, and remained strained until 1989, although the situation relaxed somewhat in the 1970s when the FRG sought a closer relationship with east European countries and the GDR was admitted to the United Nations and other international organisations.

The two German economies also differed completely from each other. The FRG received Marshall Aid from the USA which strengthened its economy. It followed the market economy style of USA, the UK and other western European countries. The USSR, on the other hand, did not allow the GDR to accept Marshall Aid, as it feared they would become too dependent on the Western economic system, and instead the GDR economy followed the state-owned economy of the USSR.

In social and cultural affairs the FRG was on a par with the USA and western Europe. The situation in the GDR differed greatly from West Germany. The GDR had a large army with an internally repressive function, was occupied by armed Soviet troops and had a secret police which infiltrated most aspects of life, yet its citizens enjoyed a relatively affluent life compared to other countries of the Soviet Bloc. There was employment for everyone, with special career opportunities for women. East Germans enjoyed state benefits as well as free higher education, small university classes, a very low crime rate, and low prices for the essentials of life - food, rent and transport.

Although the political separation of the two Germanies ended after the fall of the Wall, with the *Länder* of the former GDR being incorporated into the FRG, and the economy of the East being converted into a capitalist system, the social and cultural position of the majority of the population of Germany did not change immediately. It has been suggested that the end of the Cold War increased the importance of the nation state for many people (Chesebro 1998:217). The geographic boundaries were no longer as clear as they had been and previous distinctions were no longer relevant. Years of separation had resulted in a mentality both in East and West in which each regarded the other as foreigners. Creutziger comments that the communication problems between those of the former East and West Germanies were not solely due to their past, but that there were new forms of 'separatism' forming, held by those formerly from the East and from the West (Creutziger 1997:89). It was felt, for example, in the former GDR that the people of the FRG had not taken much interest in the life of East Germans. Another major perceived and real problem of unification was that it was not a symmetrical union: both states had different preconceptions and desires and these were very hard to reconcile. This also ties in with the fact that politically the union was not symmetrical. The GDR was simply incorporated into the FRG under the same constitution[4].

That the differences were not cancelled out by unification became obvious when the people of the two German states were forced to confront each other. For example, Baudusch writes that the differences became even more noticeable (Baudusch 1995:313). Simple everyday aspects of life in a capitalist economy had to be learned by the people of the east: how to write a business letter, curriculum vitae or letter of reference. Similarly, issues related to accommodation and employment which were familiar for westerners could become major problems for easterners. Each side tended to blame the other for negative developments outwith their control. Looking at the perceived advantages the others had gained, each side emphatically believed that

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[4] Again Herberg et al. (1997) present a very interesting section on the different words used both by east and west Germans to refer to the process of unification which illustrate the asymmetry of the situation.

the other side had got more out of unification than themselves. According to a questionnaire carried out by Wagner in 1999, 75% of all west Germans said that unification had more disadvantages than advantages for them, while 75% of all east Germans thought that the west Germans had received more. Wagner comments that this is not a good basis for understanding (Wagner 1999: 24). Many opinions were made up of stereotypes and clichés. In Bittermann's outspoken book, *It's a Zoni*, Tietz writes an article about the friction between the people of east and west. He writes that people were strangers to each other, felt they knew nothing about those who had lived on the other side of the Wall. He mentions that these feelings sometimes extended to hate. According to Tietz, rather than belonging and growing together, ten years after unification east and west Germany were further apart from each other than ever before (Tietz 1999: 39).

The concept of the Germans being strangers forced to live in an asymmetrical relationship is a topic which many linguists have discussed. Fuchs warns of the danger of not realising how different the two German people have become during the years of separation and how this has lead to a situation where the West Germans have to act like teachers towards the East Germans. He writes that there are no obvious and clearly visible differences between citizens of the former GDR and FRG which could make them more sensitive to the fact that they are different from each other. For many Germans the similarities between the people can make them feel like they are dealing with people who are almost the same as them, apart from the fact that they are a little less advanced, and therefore treat them unequally (Fuchs 1996:23). Dittmar agrees that the inequality in roles since unification has resulted in many social problems and animosity between the citizens of the two former states. He explains that some of the problems stem from the fact that, although many west Germans were initially willing to fulfil the roles of teacher and advisor, this wore off as time passed by (Dittmar 1997:4). Instead, the citizens of the GDR were put under pressure to conform to west German values; frequently by west German politicians and business leaders, but in many cases also by their own people. It was thought by many east Germans that the only way to advance was to adopt west German practices, and that all east German practices had to be discarded. Some east Germans managed quickly to adapt to the new ways and they felt comfortable with their new life, but for others it created a deep loss of identity, inferiority complexes and even identity crises. The process of assimilation and incorporating new ways of living was not as easy as many had expected. Many east Germans began to feel resentful of the manner in which they and their heritage were treated, and, in addition to feeling like second class citizens, they began to develop a sense of nostalgia, a phenomenon which became popularly known as *Ostalgie*, a word-play on the German word for nostalgia which is *Nostalgie* (for example Becker, Becker and Ruhland 1992 and actual description of the word *Ostalgie* in Kramer 1998:279). There was widespread regret that the positive features of the GDR had not been preserved. For many East Germans, unification had not been a primary goal of the demonstrations which took place in the GDR in the autumn of 1989. Many wanted a democratic state, which would still be separated from the FRG. These people wanted to keep the spirit of the GDR alive within the new Germany. At this time of sudden and rapid changes a single group identity became an important aspect of life. Heneghan explains the need among East Germans for a common identity: "This East German identity is now a symbolic construction, a reaction to the way that everything became different at once. People need an anchor to hold them steady during this radical upheaval" (Heneghan 2000:149).

The development of the German language since 1945 has been the subject of

extensive academic discourse. Research has concentrated on general developments as well as specific aspects of language. Linguists, such as Manfred Hellmann (1984, 1989, 1995), Wolf Oschlies (1981, 1989), Norbert Dittmar(1997), Ruth Reiher (1993, 1996, 2000), Ulla Fix (1994, 1997), Herberg et al. (1997) and Patrick Stevenson (1997, 2002), have comprehensively examined a wide range of topics, often surrounding social changes. Some linguists, such as Leo Hoppert (1990)and Ewald Lang (1990) have reviewed specific aspects of language in greater detail, for instance political slogans used by the demonstrators in 1989 in the GDR, while Dieter Herberg and his colleagues (1997) have studied media language from East and West Germany, as well as unified Germany, to mark the changes in the economic and political spheres of language.

The political, economic, social and cultural issues described above have influenced the development of the German language in different ways. Prior to 1989 linguists debated the question to what extent the German language was changing and whether this would lead to the formation of two different languages. The conclusion of this debate was that the languages of the two German states would not become foreign to each other, although growing differences in vocabulary were inevitable[5]. Especially in the areas of politics, economics and social areas these changes were taking place. It was, for example, found that about two thousand new words had been formed which were solely used in the GDR (Baudusch 1995:304). With these words, in addition to the many new words which had been formed in the FRG related to technological and commercial innovation, the foundation for communication difficulties in the unified Germany was laid.

Furthermore, events such as the fall of the Wall and unification of Germany in themselves created new words. Novel words were needed to describe the new situation in Germany, for example *die Wende*, which is the word which signalled the change from communism to capitalism[6]. In other cases, where an existing word had different meanings in each state or when two different words had the same meaning, a choice had to be made. However, it tended to be the East German meaning of the word or the East German word which was lost. There was little or no movement of words from East to West. Words like *Mauerspecht*, *Zwei-Plus-Vier-Gespräch* and *Stasi-Auflösung* were new overall (translated, these words refer to: people who chipped pieces from the Berlin Wall to sell to tourists; political debates which took place between east and west German governments; and liquidation of the secret police of the GDR). These were mainly words which were needed to describe the new political and social situations in Germany. Many of these words are presently already out of use in Germany as they were only needed to describe the situation at that time. But even for these new words there seemed to be a difference for east and west Germans. Most of the neologisms affected what was happening in the former GDR, as this was where most of the changes were taking place. These new words did not seem to affect the lives of FRG citizens to as great an extent. Words like *Treuhand*, *Seilschaft* and *Abwicklung* were only used passively by west Germans, while they had life-changing meanings for east Germans, often perceived in a negative way (translated these words refer to: the process of privatizing state-owned companies; people from powerful position in the GDR using

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[5] For information regarding the German situation before 1989, see Andersson 1984, Dieckmann 1989 and Lerchner 1974, although there is a vast literature regarding this time. For the situation after 1989 there is also a very comprehensive literature but to name just a few: Baudusch 1995, Hellmann 1990 and Creutziger 1997.

[6] This was a word which had been used before within both East and West German political debate. However, after 1989, the word *Wende* and with the use of the definite article, *die Wende*, only the time of 1989 is referred to.

their position to gain authority in the new Germany; and the liquidation of East German companies). Many of the new words therefore came to be hated in east Germany: *Abwicklung*, meaning the liquidation of businesses, for example, became one of the most hated words of German bureaucracy. In the world of business and commerce, many West German words were adopted in the East. Many political terms of the GDR were no longer used as the political system which required them collapsed, and the new *Länder* used West German political vocabulary.

During the fall of the Wall most linguists expected that the GDR language would be lost after 1990. This is explained by Bergmann, who discusses whether words are no longer used because they are out of date or because the actual subject being described has become obsolete (Bergmann 1995:18). Immediately after unification, many east Germans were indeed keen to avoid the language of the former GDR to avoid being pigeon-holed. The first changes in language took place in the sphere of politics, and as the official language of the SED had been so rigid, these differences were especially noticeable, with alterations being made in official discourse, for example on radio and television and in newspapers. But as the initial euphoria of belonging to a united Germany wore off, many words which had been used in East Germany were brought into use again. In addition, some East German words had to be used to describe former institutions that did not exist in the West, while other East German vocabulary was so ingrained in peoples' minds, and part of their everyday lives, that it was difficult for them to eradicate it completely. People also needed to use this language to describe the effect changes were having on their present lives. A few East German traditions continued to be carried out in unified Germany. The *Jugendweihe*, for example, which is similar to a non-religious confirmation is still taken by many East German youths. According to Kauke, 50% of all East German young people were still taking part in this ceremony in 1997 (Kauke 1997:374) and this still continues in Germany today.

Although only about 2,000 words used solely in East Germany were shown to have existed and many of these started to disappear gradually after the Wall fell, their usage did lead to some confusion. Communication breakdowns, for example, occurred because people used certain words in different ways and attached different meanings to them. Futhermore, to keep the spirit of the GDR alive, words which were not ideologically loaded were reintroduced and regularly used, for example with east Germans using the terms *Kaufhalle* instead of *Supermarkt* (both words for a supermarket) and *Broiler* instead of *Brathähnchen* (both words for a cooked chicken). In some restaurants in east Berlin there are signs saying '*Hier können Sie Broiler sagen*' (Here you may say *Broiler*). GDR nostalgia also witnessed a resurgence in the marketing world, where place of origin in the GDR was stressed in advertising features. Immediately after the Wall fell, many East German products had disappeared from the market, but many East German products returned to the market, particularly after 1993 when the situation in Germany had settled and this was underlined in advertising campaigns by stressing place of origin. Stevenson comments that by late 1991 around 75% of east Germans claimed to prefer east German products (Stevenson 2002:226).

To express feelings about each other and to emphasise the group identity, people of east and west created names for each other and for themselves (although this had occurred in the years before 1989, these usages became even more important as a feature of personal and group identity). The most basic of these words are *Ossi* and *Wessi* with others being more offensive, for example some west Germans referred to east Germans as *Einheimische Ost* (Native East Germans), *Ostpocke* (Eastern 'pox' as in smallpox), *Udo* which stood for *Unsere doofe Ossis* (our stupid Ossis). The east

Germans had less names for those from the west, but some of those in use were *die Eingebildeten* (the conceited ones), *die da drüben* (those on the other side) and occasionally *Westschweine* (West pigs). These names did not help the relationship between the people of east and west. Frequently east Germans felt a need to differentiate themselves from the West Germans and often referred to their lives as '*bei uns in der DDR*' or '*bei uns im Osten*'. This usage reinforced the mental barrier and illustrated the fact that the people of east Germany did not feel fully integrated into unified Germany. Wagner describes their reaction as a return to the features which had dominated their lives in the GDR but were felt to be less important in the time of the *Wende*: equality and solidarity (Wagner 1999:159). Dittmar comments on the fact that each side developed names to call the other because the majority of people found they could not cross the barriers of difference which separated them. He writes that people of the former East and West felt they were strangers to each other. Some people were trying to understand each other and were aiming for social and cultural unification, following the political situation. However, for many people, the separation seemed insurmountable and many names were found which described the differences (Dittmar and Bredel 1999: 64).

Stereotyping is often used in times of conflict as it can reduce the threat of the unknown by making the world more predictable (Barna 1998: 181). Identity is about contrasting between 'us' and 'them' and about the different aspects that make up these groups: the rituals, the ideologies as well as language and experience (Tanno & González 1998:3). Stereotypes are interesting to examine as they tend to be only partially correct but can become self-fulfilling prophesies if used too often (Bennett 1998:6). Any group looks at itself and analyses it (often favourably) when it comes into contact with another identity group, particularly if this is an opposing group of people. Another interesting feature is that the more intense the conflict between the different groups, the better each side considers itself and the other side are viewed as being worse (Singer 1998:74).

In short, as time went on after the fall of the Wall, the type of language used was more crucial in the former GDR than in the West. Using East German words became a way of making a statement. Dittmar and Bredel comment on this usage of East German vocabulary, stating that those who use East German language are coming out as '*Ossis*', and those who do not use it are losing part of their language. They comment that there is no such thing as being neutral (Dittmar and Bredel 1999:138).

Often it is in the spoken language that such statements are made. In addition to using special words, speakers have other ways of expressing an identity, for example by speaking in dialect. The usage of the dialect of Berlin, *Berlinisch*, illustrates this. Throughout the GDR, *Berlinisch* was seen as a dialect of the workers, which had a very positive role in the socialist state and was considered a prestige variety (Schmidt-Regener 1999 and Stevenson 2002). For many East Germans this dialect signalled a difference between the people and the GDR politicians, many of whom were from Saxony and therefore had a different accent. People used this dialect in all areas of life, including in the workplace, schools and universities. In West Berlin though, this dialect was frowned upon and tended to be avoided in public. Especially after unification, *Berlinisch* became a way of identifying oneself with the people of the former GDR and was used throughout the east, not just in east Berlin.

One of the problems within Germany's situation is that there were not clear geographical boundaries between the people. Both groups of people, both from the former GDR and FRG spoke the 'same' language which, initially, meant that people felt as if they belonged to the same 'culture'. However, this language was not paralleled

by similar knowledge or ways of thinking. Once we look beyond the superficial level, we can see how the differences in language were one of the reasons conflict came into play. Singer comments that "intercultural communication skills aren't something that one is born with, they are developed over years of practice and hard work and being in contact with people who are different from us" (Singer 1998:97). He continues with the idea that people don't have to like each other's values or way of being in order to be able to communicate effectively with one another, but that understanding each other is an important factor.

In conclusion, it can be said that years of separation, lack of communication and new problems which arose after unification, affect the lives of people in both east and west Germany. An on-going process of political, economic, social and cultural change is illustrated in their usage of German. At the same time language is used both consciously and subconsciously to emphasise perceived and real problems and group identification. The building of a new relationship between the populations from east and west is hampered by language and intercultural communication problems. Kramer writes that since the fall of the Wall in 1989 many different people have referred to a new Wall, one which cannot be overcome. This new Wall is a psychological one, it exists within peoples' heads and is separating the Germans (Kramer 1996:55). To break this wall down, linguists can make a contribution. By making people more aware of what separates and unites them, they can encourage tolerance and acceptance. Much more research remains to be done, but creating a better understanding of language usage and intercultural communication [7] can help solve problems, not only in contemporary Germany but also in Europe as a whole.

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[7] Stevenson comments that the notion of 'intercultural' and 'interculturality' are not clear. He comments "if communicative obstacles are found to be no greater and no more systematic between east and west Germans than, say, between Hamburgers and Bavarians, the ground for claiming 'interculturality' are not clear … being east or west German is therefore not a sufficient condition for interaction between two parties to be construed as intercultural, nor is it merely a matter of identifying different communicative practices: the differences have to derive from, and be actively associated with, incompatible features of the participants'.

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