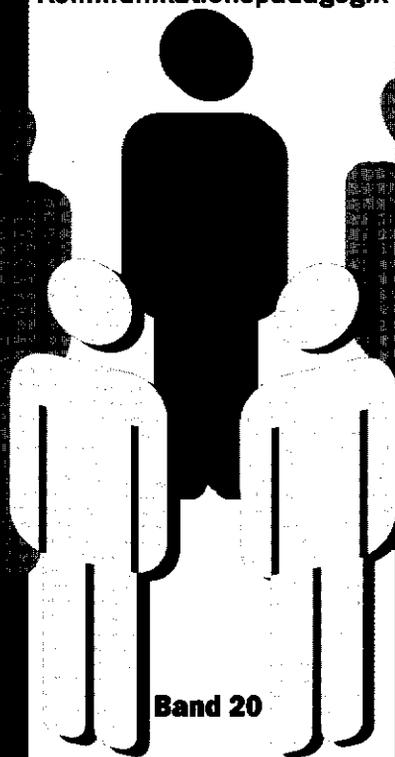


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# Communication and Political Change

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# A Linguistic Analysis of How Major Political Decisions are Communicated

### Decision-Making in a Representative Democracy

Political changes with far-reaching consequences have taken place in Germany over the last thirteen years, such as the reunification of East and West Germany, changes in the constitution, in particular those concerning matters of war and peace, and the introduction of new European laws (including the abolition of the Deutschmark) with the implication that Germany has surrendered a substantial portion of her sovereignty. There was no political party (apart from a few splinter groups) whose election manifesto represented an alternative to these decisions, and no referendum was held in Germany: And yet all decisions were declared to be those of the people. I will analyze political statements in terms of argument structure, semantics and discourse analysis and I will argue that – when it comes to major political changes – political communication is trying to achieve the impossible: to convince the public that they have made decisions they have not made.

As I will discuss these issues mainly at the national level (as opposed to the individual states of the Federal Republic of Germany), it may be helpful to take a brief look at constitutional articles pertaining to decision-making processes. It is true that the constitution of Germany states that all state authority emanates from the people, but the addition, i.e. "It shall be

exercised by the people by means of elections ..." renders Germany the prototype of a representative democracy. Neither the president nor the head of government are elected by the people. The Federal Council is not a second chamber in the constitutional sense as it is not elected by the people, but by the governments of the individual German states (the "Länder"). The legislative period is four years and elections can only be brought forward under exceptional circumstances and only with the consent of the president. The "five percent debarring clause," which stipulates that in order to be represented in parliament a party must poll at least 5% of the votes, led to the fact that when the constitution came into force only four of the 36 parties which sought election were actually represented in parliament. A referendum at the national level is unconstitutional.

The German electorate can vote for a political party and its manifesto, i.e. for a package deal where issues such as unemployment, abortion, ecology, and war and peace are lumped together, but they cannot enforce a vote on any particular issue. The dilemma politicians are faced with is the question: How do I communicate major changes, such as the ones mentioned above, as decisions that were made on behalf of the electorate, that I act according to their wishes without actually letting them have a say in the matter, and that I represent at least those citizens who voted for me?

In a discussion on whether a referendum (with whatever restrictions imposed on its implementation as may be deemed necessary) should be introduced as part of decision-making processes in Germany, the leader of the opposition, Angela Merkel said 'No' because "it is better to convince the voters through argumentation," as if holding a referendum ruled out reasoning.

## Zero Information

Evelyn Waugh said about American fast food that it was not the taste he found disturbing, it was, rather, the absence of taste. There is, by analogy, something like fast food for thought characterized by the absence of information. In 2001, at the end of a summit meeting of the leaders of the European Union, with far-reaching consequences for the sovereignty of the individual countries, Joschka Fischer, the Foreign Minister, was interviewed about the results, and the following is a transcript of his statement in full as broadcast by the ARD, Germany's major state television channel:

Es gibt ja so etwas wie, eh, 'ne Verhandlungsdramaturgie, wenn es um so viel geht, eh, das war auch in Berlin bei der Agenda 2000 während unserer Präsidentschaft so. Eh, es gibt Höhen und Tiefen, eh, aber insgesamt sind doch Fortschritte zu sehen, allerdings wir haben noch größere Klippen zu überwinden.

(There is, of course, uhm, a negotiating scenario when there is so much at stake, uhm, this was also the case in Berlin at the Agenda 2000 during our presidency. Uhm, there are ups and downs, uhm, but by and large progress can be seen, there are, however, still a few major hurdles to be cleared.)

One may think of this type of rhetoric as a "cut and paste" technique, because this statement can be used again at the next European meeting, the G 7 summit meeting or the Bakers' Annual Convention.

## Brain Savers

In a cul-de-sac no one would enter a discussion on which route should be pursued because one does not have a choice here. In linguistics this situation has found expression in the principle "Meaning (in the sense of information content) implies choice." In the phrase "She has beautiful long straight blond X," there is no choice after "*blond*" and the word for "X" is 100% predictable, or, in terms of information theory, it is redundant. In the context of that sentence, there is no alternative for "*hair*." The implications are that (a) even if one had missed the last word one would not ask the speaker to repeat it, and (b) one would not start a discussion on stylistic alternatives here, because there are none. Margaret Thatcher, the former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, was nicknamed "Tina," which is an acronym of her favorite phrase "There is no alternative." As politicians in western democracies believe in freedom of thought, and as there is no Thought Police as in George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, they have to take refuge in frequent incantations of phrases that act – if the analogy with screen savers is permitted – as brain savers. In terms of discourse analysis, "There is no alternative" is a paraphrase of "stop thinking!"

This phrase was most frequently used when the German electorate looked with envy at France and Denmark, where referenda on the European unification were possible. In 1994, when European legislation was still under discussion and with only two months to go before elections to the European parliament were held, *Das Parlament*, a government weekly, had the following headline on its front page:

Die EU am Scheideweg:

„Zur europäischen Einigung gibt es keine Alternative“

Europessimismus ist Mode. In Frankreich und anscheinend auch in Deutschland und anderen Mitgliedstaaten der Europäischen Gemeinschaft.

(The European Union at a cross roads:

"There is no alternative to European unification"

Europessimism is in fashion. In France and apparently in Germany, too, and in other member states of the European Community.)

Let us take a closer look at this way of thinking as evidenced by the language of the author of this article: Of course, everybody could think of hundreds of alternatives, but – as mentioned before – the purpose of these phrases is to discourage thinking. The danger of this invocation is illustrated by the fact that Monsieur Pflimlin, i.e. the author himself, has fallen victim to it, as the two-part headline is a contradiction in terms. "Ein Scheideweg" opens up two alternatives by definition, which he negates in the second part. And the opinion of the people – as opposed to Das Parlament and politicians – is brushed aside as trendy and short-lived.

There are many paraphrases of the Tina principle, or, put differently, there are many alternatives to the phrase "There is no alternative." In 1996, when the European currency union was discussed, the then President of Germany was interviewed by *Die Woche* (14 June 1996) in an article with the headline "*Die Debatte ist gefährlich*" ("*The debate is dangerous*"). Asked about what he thought of introducing a referendum, he said a referendum was unconstitutional and one should keep ones hands off it. And he warned all political parties not to make an election issue of the introduction of the Euro: Three appeals to discourage alternatives to the course of action that he favored.

The German word "Sachzwang" implies the absence of choice by suggesting that one is forced to act in only one way due to the force of

circumstance. In a project on how pupils and students cope with the language of politicians and journalists (Eckert 1999), informants were given quotes from VIPs containing the word "*Sachzwang*" and were asked if they could think of feasible alternatives to the implied only course of action. There was no single usage of this word that our informants considered to be tantamount to the phrases "There is no alternative" or "We are compelled by the facts." We then asked our informants whether they could make up contexts in which the use of "*Sachzwang*" might be justified. They thought of natural disasters like floods and landslides, which would necessitate detours. The interesting and perhaps revealing result of this experiment was the complete absence of "*Sachzwang*" in our corpus of the media in precisely these situations.

Related to the use of "*Sachzwang*" is the fact that politicians often resort to conjuring up archaic images by using phrases such as "Es ist einfach kein Geld da" ("There's simply no money") and "Die Kassen sind leer" ("There is no money in the till"). Of course everybody knows that a modern state can borrow money, print money, raise taxes, reduce pensions, enforce a currency reform, sell assets etc., etc., but instead of saying "The government does not want to resort to any of these means for this particular purpose," we are supposed to think of a medieval king climbing down stone steps into a deep vault of his castle, opening the lid of great coffer only to find – to his great dismay – that there are no coins left in it. I feel that a modern democracy that takes political discourse seriously has to train its journalists to point this out to politicians in interviews. When politicians come up with the frequently heard phrase "Es ist kein Geld da, es handelt sich hier um Sachzwänge: das muss man einfach so sehen" ("There's simply no money, these are compelling facts of the matter: this is the way one has to look at it") journalists ought to suggest alternatives instead of

saying "Danke, Herr Minister" and looking like Mowgly when Sir Hiss hypnotizes him.

Yet another variation of the theme "There is no alternative" is the cut and paste technique of truisms. The grand master of this technique was Helmut Kohl, the former chancellor of Germany. He was known to avoid the nitty-gritty bit, which he left to people lower down in the hierarchy. He frequently used phrases such as "Es kommt jetzt darauf an, besonnen zu handeln" ("It is important now to act sensibly"), "Es geht hier um eine für alle Beteiligten gerechte Lösung" ("This is about finding a just solution for everybody concerned"), and "Die Beiträge müssen im Rahmen des Möglichen bleiben" ("The contributions have to remain within what is possible and feasible"). The reader may like to place himself/herself in the position of the leader of the opposition and think of an immediate response to these statements.

### Presupposition vs. Assertion

The word "*Vorurteil*" ("*prejudice*") logically and semantically presupposes the existence of "*Urteil*," and "*Rassenvorurteil*" ("*racial prejudice*") presupposes "*Rassenurteil*" ("*a racial judgement*"). A compound consisting of the two constituents "*Rassen*" and "*Urteil*" is, of course, a possible type of word formation, and since "*Rassenvorurteil*" exists there must, by definition, be the lexical alternative "*Rassenurteil*." And yet, as any corpus analysis reveals, this compound is never used in German, no Internet search machine comes up with results, and German dictionaries do not have an entry for it. In order to appreciate the implications of this puzzling fact an analogy might be useful: If, after having asked informants to give us examples of "*bachelors*" and assuming

they had come up with a list of people they knew to be bachelors, we then asked them to give examples of "*husbands*," we would be amazed if they hesitated and had to think about the meaning of "*husband*." "*Bachelor*" as a term for marital status is defined by the absence of something (here: not having a wife, just like "*Vorurteil*" is defined by the absence of having evaluated the facts). So the lexeme "*bachelor*" is inconceivable without the existence of "*husband*" or "*married man*."

The analysis of the two lexemes in question reveals that the absence of "*Rassenurteil*" as opposed to "*Rassenvorurteil*" does not represent a lexical gap in the language but a gap in usage, which is a reflection of our culture. When you ask Germans to give an example of "*Vorurteil*" ("*prejudice*") you invariably get "*Rassenvorurteil*" ("*racial prejudice*") as one of the first items. When you then ask them what a "*Rassenurteil*" ("*a racial judgement*") might be, they usually look puzzled, because their linguistic competence as native speakers tells them the word should exist but they have never come across it. After some reflection most people then come up with "All races are equal," as an example of a "*Rassenurteil*," and if you then ask them whether that applies to, for example, growth and temperament, they usually get impatient and say these are facetious arguments and that these features were not the issue at all. If you are persistent and ask them whether empirical data have proved their thesis, the argument becomes very complex involving problems of underprivileged groups, the validity of IQ tests cutting across cultures and social classes, etc. My purpose in outlining these observations is by no means an attempt to revive the old Eysenck debate. What I am trying to argue is that most of us use the term "*prejudice*" not in the meaning of the dictionary definition: "*Vorurteil* (n. ...) *vorgefasste Meinung, Urteil ohne Prüfung der Tatsachen* [...]" (*prejudice: a preconceived opinion without taking facts into account* [...])" (Wahrig 2001). In discussions that do not have an ideological basis, we do

not use the word "*Vorurteil*," i.e. in wrong answers to "How far is it to Berlin?" and "What time is it?" we would never accuse the interlocutor of having a prejudice. Longman's Dictionary of English Language and Culture takes this into account by including the moral dimension: "prejudice, n. [...] unfair and often unfavorable feeling or opinion formed without thinking deeply and clearly or without enough knowledge ...". The existence of "*Rassenvorurteil*" and the absence of "*Rassenurteil*" has to be interpreted as the language community's attempt to say that what we are interested in are civic rights and a fair deal for all people, and not "*Rassenforschung*" (racial research), because whatever the outcome, it will not and should not have any effect on constitutional rights and equal opportunities.

In an experiment with pupils and students, I asked the test persons to classify a number of statements as "a prejudice" or "no prejudice" or as "not applicable/I am not sure." The answers were not given on the basis of the criterion "an opinion formed without thinking deeply and clearly or without enough knowledge," but rather on the basis of the other criterion: "unfair and often unfavorable feelings." Positive statements about underprivileged groups were not classed as "prejudices," irrespective of the empirical evidence at the test person's disposal. So there was a marked tendency to class the following statements "no prejudice": "In Christian societies women have a better role than in Muslim societies," "Women are more sensitive to interpersonal relationships than men," "Black is beautiful," "Women have a greater gift for learning languages than men," whereas statements such as "Girls are not as good in physics as boys" and "In academic fields black people perform less well than white people" were classed as "prejudice" by most test persons.

The non-occurrence of "*Rassenurteil*" is one of the brain savers mentioned above. It signals that Germans (and other language communities

with a similar semantic set-up) have agreed to consider the debate closed and not to fund research into possible differences between races. To me this seems a very elegant and likable way of education through language. A related phenomenon is the term "*politically in/correct*." In its absurdity (after post-modernism and constructivist theories) it smacks of thought police methods, and yet it is widely accepted because it was coined to educate us through language use in order to be fair to underprivileged groups. If the very same term had been coined by the Bush administration as a dogma of infallibility in order to condemn any linguistic means of disagreeing with the "politically incorrect non-Bush administration," it would have triggered off a huge debate among intellectuals all over the world. The condemnation or condonement of these brain saving techniques is as simple and understandable as the labeling of historic events and people as either a "Good Thing" or a "Bad Thing" in the satirical version of an English history text book in 1066 and all that.

Assuming then that the non-occurrence of "*Rassenurteil*" is a "Good Thing," we still have to be aware of speakers who take advantage of these tacit agreements, as a semantic analysis of these terms will show. The difference between "That is a prejudice" and "You are prejudiced" on the one hand, and "That's wrong" and "I am of a different opinion" on the other is that speakers using the word "*prejudice*" claim a metalevel of understanding. They do not see themselves as one of two people engaged in a debate, but rather as an umpire or a judge presiding over a debate with a higher level of understanding than the people taking part in it. The use of "*prejudice*" asserts that the opinion thus labeled is negative but only presupposes that the speaker has a metalevel of insight. Semantic features that are presupposed in compounds are less likely to be examined than those that are asserted. I have argued elsewhere (Eckert 2001) that the compound "self-realization" *asserts* the component "becoming real" and

*presupposes* the existence of a "self." Thus the phrase "No self-realization was able to take place" would always be interpreted as the denial of the process due to circumstances, but never as "the negation because no self had been developed that could be realized, or was worth the process of realization." Most young people interpret "*self-realization*" as the right to do as they please, but not as the responsibility to develop their own "self."

Many speakers take advantage of the following principle: Presupposed elements are rarely queried. In his article "Die Menschen-Feinde" ("The Enemies of Human Beings"), published in *Die Woche* (1 September 1994) Günter Heismann lists five "*Vorurteile*," highlighted as subheadings in red. One of them reads: "*Vorurteil 1. Es droht eine`Bevölkerungsexplosion`*" (*Prejudice number one: There is the threat of a`population explosion`*). He then quotes three UN estimates of possible growth rates to illustrate the complexity of the problem and the uncertainty of long-term predictions. And yet, by using the term "*prejudice*," he claims to be above it all: His own claim that there is no threat of a population explosion over the next 150 years is classified as a judgement as opposed to the prejudices of other experts, or put differently, his prediction is not on a par with the others because it represents a higher level of cognition.

### "Ve ask ze kvestionss"

An article by H. G. Teschner on the introduction of the new European currency in *Die Funkuhr* in 1998 begins with a statement on the fears of many Germans about the abolition of the Deutschmark: "Sie haben Angst, sich durch das neue Geld zu verschlechtern" ("People fear they may be worse off with the new currency"). One of the questions put to experts was whether German citizens might lose out when they exchanged their

Deutschmarks for Euros. The answer given by Dr. Sprenger, head of the Association of German Banks, was an emphatic "No!" because if the exchange rate was going to be 2:1 a glass of beer that used to cost 4 DM would cost 2 Euros in the future. This is an illustration of the ploy: "If you do not like a particular question answer another one." Germans did not ask him: "How many times does 2 go into 4?" In the past, governments had always assured Germans that their Deutschmark was characterized as a hard and stable currency. They now wanted an answer to the question whether German citizens' money would still have the same purchasing power within a European currency or whether this could be affected by joining ranks with poorer nations. When journalists ask politicians or financial experts if gas prices will go up, they should not be satisfied with answers like: "No! You will still be able to buy gas for \$20."

### "Ausdruck von Volkes Wille"

Another question in the same article is "Could a referendum stop the introduction of the Euro in Germany?" The answer was:

Nein! Alle großen Parteien haben zugestimmt. Ihre Entscheidung ist zugleich Ausdruck von Volkes Wille," sagt Boris Knapp, Sprecher von Finanzminister Theo Waigel. Laut Meinungsumfragen lehnen aber über 50% der Bundesbürger die neue Währung ab. Deshalb läuft jetzt ein Werbefeldzug zugunsten des Euro. Kosten: 15 Millionen Mark.

(No! All major parties have given their consent. Their decision is at the same time an expression of what the people want," says Boris Knapp, spokesman of Finance Minister Theo Waigel. According to opinion polls, however, over 50% of all German citizens are against the new currency. That is why a publicity campaign for the Euro has been launched now. The cost of this campaign: 15 million Deutschmarks.)

It is only after the decision has been taken by the government that this government spends the tax money of the majority of tax payers to promote government policy and to ensure that what was labeled "*Ausdruck von Volkes Wille*" will be the "expression of what the people want," even though they did not know it at the time. This is one way of communicating political change in a representative democracy.

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