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# The English of shop signs in Europe

MARIA SCHLICK

A case study of foreign and especially English influence on the language of shop signs and shop windows in three European cities

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PEOPLE have always worried about language purity: 'No greater harm can be done to a nation than taking away its national character and the idiosyncrasies of its language' (Immanuel Kant, over 200 years ago). 'Kein Denglisch in deutschen Wörterbüchern' is a citation of the German *Verein zur Wahrung der deutschen Sprache e.V.* ('Association for the Protection of the German Language')<sup>1</sup>, founded in 1997. Theirs is a struggle to keep German free of too much foreign-language influence: most notably English.

The VWdS has been waging an uphill battle against the many incursions of English, a trend that creates in the Association's view a mongrel language, sometimes called *Denglish* or *Deutschlish* or *Gernglish* or *Gerlish*. However, the Association is not against all loanwords. If there is not a good German equivalent, the VWdS accepts the use of such borrowed words. But it is strongly opposed to what it sees as the unnecessary use of English in German if it's just to be fashionable or to show off. In their list of English words which should not at all be used because there is a good German equivalent, there is for example *Handout*, for which they strongly recommended *Tischvorlage*. A German-speaking professor of the institute of Romanistik used this very word the other day. I did not repeat it, because I felt uncomfortable with *Tischvorlage* and would rather use *Handout*. Five minutes later, a colleague of mine had a conversation with the same professor, and my colleague used *Handout* while the professor repeatedly said *Tischvorlage*. However, neither my colleague nor I was able to bring ourselves to say the German word.



Fig 1: Two shop signs in Klagenfurt, Austria

Not only Immanuel Kant and the *Verein* have been troubled by too much foreign influence: the same is true for people on the street. I learned this when I took photos for this study in Klagenfurt and was addressed by a couple who watched me doing it. They assumed I was gathering material to demonstrate the over-extensive use of English in shop windows and that I was going to complain about it. They encouraged me to struggle against this sort of *Überfremdung* ('foreign infiltration') and said that they were annoyed to see so many foreign terms, especially English ones, everywhere in Klagenfurt.

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MARIA SCHLICK was born and educated in Lower Austria. After attending a commercial school, she worked as a secretary, partly in the province of Salzburg, partly in Vienna. In 1996, after being a full-time mother for many years, she started studying English and French at the University of Klagenfurt, Austria. She is currently working on her thesis, looking at bilingualism in shop signs and window displays.

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Contrasting attitudes: on the one hand, people and organisations worried that German will become a mongrel language; on the other, shop owners eager to catch the eyes of people passing by. I am not going to discuss here whether the use of such foreign terms is good or bad. Rather, I want to look at a range of shop windows in three cities and examine to what extent there are foreign terms and slogans and other foreign influences in advertising. I also want to look at whether only German (in this context Austrian) advertisements have many foreign terms in them or whether this is also true for Italian and Slovenian advertising.

My research was in Klagenfurt, Udine and Ljubljana, three towns in three different countries with three mother tongues. Klagenfurt is the capital of the province Carinthia in Austria (with c.90,000 inhabitants); Udine is a provincial capital in the north of Italy (with c.95,000 inhabitants); and Ljubljana is the capital of Slovenia (with c.280,000 inhabitants). I chose three small areas, looking at 20–45 shops in each, going through Kramergasse and Wiener Gasse in Klagenfurt, Via Mercato Vecchio in Udine, and *copova ulica* in Ljubljana, noting shop signs, trade descriptions, slogans, and the like. I concentrated on striking designations, especially whether foreign languages were used or not, and left out most designations in the mother tongue.

My expectations were that I would find a lot of foreign designations, especially English ones, in Klagenfurt. I assumed that there would probably be fewer foreign signs in Udine, because I thought that Italian advertisers would find their language apt enough for advertising, and that there would be less need of foreign borrowings. Finally I expected even fewer foreign terms in Ljubljana, as I thought there would be fewer international business branches located in this town – and local shops would perhaps also be less influenced by foreign advertising language.

### Surveying shop signs

There has already been a similar study by Tom McArthur. In 1999, he did a study first of shop signs in Zurich in Switzerland, then in Uppsala in Sweden<sup>2</sup>. He walked around a chosen area in the city centre of each location, noting 31 shop signs in Zurich and 86 signs in Uppsala.

The result of his research in Zurich showed not only signs in foreign languages but no

**Table 1: Language used in the shop signs of McArthur's Zurich and Uppsala sample**

	total	MT	E	F	I
Zurich	31	20	18	11	6
Uppsala	86	54	38	18	5

MT = mother tongue; E = English; F = French; I = Italian

**Table 2: Language used in the shop signs in Zurich, Uppsala and Klagenfurt; percentage**

100%	Mother tongue	English	French	Italian
Zurich	65%	58%	35%	19%
Uppsala	63%	44%	21%	6%
Klagenfurt	64%	36%	21%	21%

fewer than 21 (out of a total of 31) with variously bilingual and trilingual messages. There were only 2 German unilingual signs whereas he found 5 English-only signs. McArthur states that German was nevertheless the prominent language, as not only 2 unilingual signs but also 18 bilingual and multilingual signs had German in them. The second most frequent language was English, then French and Italian. This pattern was similar in the Uppsala sample.

Table 1 shows that in each town the local language was the prominent language, then English, French and Italian.

### Shop signs in Klagenfurt

I did my research in Klagenfurt on December 15, 2000, in Udine on December 28, 2000, and in Ljubljana on January 8, 2001. As there was already a basis for comparison I started with the shop signs.

The shop signs I listed in Klagenfurt more or less confirmed McArthur's study. The samples for Zurich and Uppsala had 63–65% of shop signs containing terms in the local language, exactly the same as in my Klagenfurt sample. There were fewer signs with English, only 36%, whereas in the Uppsala sample there were 44% and in the Zurich sample 58% signs containing English. The reason for fewer signs containing English in the Klagenfurt sample seems not to be that Klagenfurt people have less need for foreign terms in advertising, but that there are fewer signs with *macaronic* features: that is,

**Table 3: Language in shop signs in Klagenfurt**

Town	Total	Languages		Number	Percentage
Klagenfurt	42	unilingual	German-only	15	36%
			English-only	6	14%
			French-only	4	10%
			Italian-only	3	7%
		bilingual	German + English	7	17%
			German + French	3	7%
			German + Latin	1	2%
			English + French	1	2%
			English + Italian	1	2%
		trilingual	German + French + Italian	1	2%

features where more than one language is used. In Klagenfurt, the percentage of unilingual signs is much larger, and thus a unilingual sign is counted only in one language rubric whereas the shop sign in Zurich *Jersey Chic – Gross in Grossen Grössen* is counted as having German, English and French terms in them.

As there is also a Slovenian ethnic group living in Carinthia you might expect that there are also shop signs with Slovenian terms in them, but there are none in my sample. The largest group of foreign terms is English (36%), as assumed; the second most frequent foreign language is French (15%); and in third place, Italian (7%).

### Unilingual signs

The unilingual signs I noted in Klagenfurt show much the same pattern: local language (15 German signs), then English (6 signs), French (4) and Italian (3). Most unilingual signs in Klagenfurt were simply names, where you can partly assume that they are German surnames – such as *Heyn*, *Gazelle*, *Schullin*, and clear foreign names like *Pearle*, *Ligne*, *Prestiges*, etc. Some names are put up just to show which kind of shop you have in front of you, like *Drogerie*, *Café*. *Drogerie* is a term which can be regarded as a kind of Latin internationalism, deriving from Latin *drogia* ('drug'), and variants occur in many languages, such as German *Drogerie*, French *droguerie*, and Italian *drogheria*.

In Austria, *café* is written both with and without an acute accent. Austrian speakers are normally aware that it is a French term, but it is

their normal term for a coffee-house. There is also the German *Kaffeehaus*, but you very seldom find this term as a shop sign. *Café* has become international, in the English-speaking world (with and without the acute), and in Italy and Slovenia. Borrowings like *café*, *bar*, *restaurant*, etc., are no longer seen as really foreign; they are normal and no longer striking. Other foreign terms, such as those in Image 1 (the shop signs shoes and *LEISURE WEAR*) are meant to catch the eye when put to work in an Austrian town. The use of English in these cases is meant to convey the message that the shop is up-to-date and selling the latest fashion.

### Macaronic tendencies

The word *macaronic* means involving or characterised by a mixture of languages: especially designating or relating to burlesque verse in which real or coined words from two or more languages are mixed, or where words of a vernacular language are given Latin case endings and mixed with Latin words.

McArthur has used the term for signs which mark internationalisms and trendiness and co-occur with signs that either maintain or seek to revive local usage or draw on other languages. Examples of such mixtures in Klagenfurt are *CAFE KONDITOREI CORSO*, a mix of French, German, and Italian, *Café My Way*, *Auskunftsdatei Blue Moon*, *Modeschmuck G&G DESIGN*, and *High Life in der Natur*. Such signs are doubly eye-catching: first by using English to mark trendiness, then by using German as a marker of being rooted with one's soil. The two messages



Fig 2:  
Multilingual  
shop signs in  
Klagenfurt



Table 4: Percentage of unilingual and multilingual shop signs in Udine and Ljubljana

Town	Total		Languages	Number	Percentage
Udine	42	unilingual	Italian	25	60%
			English	5	12%
			French	3	7%
			Latin	1	2%
			German	1	2%
			Greek	1	2%
		bilingual	Italian + English	2	5%
			Italian + French	2	5%
			Italian + Latin	1	2%
			trilingual	Italian + French + English	1
Ljubljana	18	unilingual	Slovenian	7	39%
			English	3	17%
			Italian	1	6%
		bilingual	Slovenian + English	3	17%
			Slovenian + Latin	1	6%
			Italian + French	1	6%
			trilingual	Slovenian + Italian + French	1

**Table 5: The number of different signs in my sample of Klagenfurt, Udine and Ljubljana**

	Total	Local language	English	French	Italian
Klagenfurt	42	26	15	9	5
Udine	42	32	8	6	32
Ljubljana	18	12	6	2	3

**Table 6: Percentage of shop signs with one special and those with different languages in them – arranged according to the language they share**

100%	Local language	English	French	Italian
Zurich	65%	58%	35%	19%
Uppsala	63%	44%	21%	6%
Klagenfurt	64%	36%	21%	12%
Udine	65%	25%	17%	65%
Ljubljana	67%	33%	11%	18%

contradict each other and so draw the attention of strollers to the shop.

In McArthur's Zurich sample, there are 21 variously bilingual and trilingual messages in a group of 31 signs (68% of the sample). In my Klagenfurt sample, there are (in a group of 42 signs) 28 unilingual and 14 multilingual signs, i.e. 33% multilingual. One reason for the difference could be what McArthur also pointed out: Switzerland is a multilingual country – and Zurich as a major Swiss city is already noted for its cosmopolitanism. The town where I gathered my first sample, Klagenfurt, is however a much smaller town, in a mainly unilingual country. Zurich has about 400,000 inhabitants: four times as large as Klagenfurt.

### Shop signs in Udine and Ljubljana

After I had done my research in Klagenfurt, I assumed that Italian shop signs and windows would contain fewer foreign terms – assuming that Italians would consider their language as more apt to catch customers than Austrians consider German to be. I also expected that in Ljubljana I would find even fewer foreign designations as there would be fewer international business branches than in Austria or in Italy.

When we compare the percentage of shop signs containing both mother-tongue and foreign words, there is a striking correspondence in all five towns. All range between 63% and

67% of shop signs with the mother tongue in them. With the use of Anglicisms, there is more of a difference: 58% of the Zurich signs and 36% of the Klagenfurt signs had English in them, whereas only 25% of those in Udine had English in them. The percentage of the signs with French in them is nearly equal: 15% in Klagenfurt; 17% in Udine. Most of the signs in Udine are unilingual. The bilingual ones are: *Sestante travel shop*, *Internet*, *Cafe Bar a la Rocca*, *Centro Tim*, *Nuovo Cafe Comercio*, and *Femme Biancheria*. As the term cafe is not really felt to be foreign by Italians, only three names remain, none of them striking. Italian advertisers seem to rely more on unilingual signs – and on the arrangement of colours as the images below show. ■

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