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Unwrapping the Burger and Fries: English Signs in Hamburg

March 2019 – My husband wanted a hamburger. On the recommendation of friends, we went to a Jim Block restaurant in downtown Hamburg, near the Rathaus and Alster. As we entered the restaurant, I couldn't help but wonder if I was still in Germany, for much of the signage was in English.

Jim Block is a popular fast-food restaurant chain in northern Germany. Its logo mixes German and English—a red circle with the letters “JB”, and the words “Das Hamburger Original” below. The menu continues this mashup; guests can “Choose Your Burger: jeden JB Burger mit Prime Beef, Chicken oder Veggie Patty.”

Why did the restaurant proprietors combine English and German? The purchasing transaction occurred in German, my burger came with a fork and a knife (which would never happen in the United States), and the subtexts all indicated German as the language of business. Yet English occupied a premiere position on the menu. What could this mean, beyond selling burgers and fries? Why was English found in the cultural and financial center of Hamburg, one of Germany's wealthiest and economically powerful cities?

I decided to explore the main commercial streets of three neighborhoods on the west side of the city. Othmarschen is an upscale district known for its Anglophonic bent. Middle-class Eimsbüttel offers trendy shops and restaurants. My own neighborhood, Eidelstedt, is a mix of working-class and middle-class folks, and a lot of immigrants from non-Western countries. All three neighborhoods are accessible to each other and to downtown by public transit, yet each maintains its distinct characteristics. Would English be present? If so, where?

Exploring the language of store signs

Storefront signs provide an opportunity to learn a great deal about a particular neighborhood. While primarily used to advertise wares and entice customers to cross the shop's threshold—ideally opening their pocketbooks—storefront signs can also communicate cultural values.

A store sign can indicate who is encouraged to enter a shop and who isn't, as well as expectations on both the part of the merchant and consumer. For example, a sign printed in one language (in this case, German) sends a message that German-speakers should feel welcome and that this establishment values the German language; Non-German speakers should be prepared to communicate in German and should not expect any transactions in or representations of their native language or culture.

However, a sign in two languages implies a welcoming of both languages and both cultural values. The Jim Block signage, being in both German and English, indicated that a mixture of German and English/American world views would be most likely represented in the restaurant. For a consumer, multilingualism on store signs could signify inclusion, modernity, exoticization, or even false expectations.

Power relations can be expressed via the sign's font size, color and shape. A sign showing *Naildesign & Fußpflege* (found in Eimsbüttel) entirely in equal size, shape and color font indicates a balance of power between the two languages. However, a supermarket sign for *basic* in large letters and *Bio-Genuss für alle* (also Eimsbüttel) in smaller letters signifies that

the status symbolized by *basic* is higher than what is represented by *Bio-Genuss für alle*.



This can be complicated by a single, well-placed English word in a predominately German sign, such as *Sale!*. Such placement uses the secondary language to emphasize the social clout and high status of the dominant language.

Store signs can also hint at an imagined understanding of a foreign culture. Because signs carry symbolic weight and have cultural associations, the consumer connects their personal understandings of what is being represented with what is being sold in the store. This, in turn, means that the customer purchases not just the material product, but the social associations ascribed to that product. This was evidenced in all three districts, but more so in Othmarschen and in Eimsbüttel.

Othmarschen—Keep Calm and Hanseatic

Signs on storefronts in Othmarschen were written in both German and English. Some stores had German names with English subtext; others had English names with German subtext.

In Othmarschen, proprietors assumed that their patrons would have a certain depth of British cultural knowledge, and rewarded that knowledge via playful store names. A high-end pet store called *Pet Shop Boyz* sold “alles für

den Hund”, thereby linking designer dog collars to British 1980s pop band Duran Duran. This deliberate association of British megastars might remind middle-aged pet owners of their youthful clubbing days; the “z” on the end hints at edgy life in modern London.



A children’s clothing boutique, *Miss Sophie’s Kindermoden*, alludes to *Dinner for One*, the British comedy sketch televised every New Year’s Eve throughout Germany. Another upscale boutique, *Smith’s Clothing*, nods to the Oxford English Dictionary definitions of a “smith” as a skilled artisan or metalworker, or a destiny shaper; the shop’s website states, in English: “Smith’s offers fashion luxuriously made in relaxed, fashionable styles for men and women, for young and old”.



These store names deliberately recall images of British English as a trend-setting, wealthy, and fashionable language. By reinforcing images of timeless prosperity, the English language itself becomes a commodity from which the shops in Othmarschen can profit. An upper-class Britishness, in particular, seemed to be desired.

With an average income of €108,258 per annum, Othmarschen is one of Hamburg’s wealthiest districts. Its main shopping district is

the Waitzstraße, a three-block high street near the S-Bahn station. Othmarschen is neither downtown nor on the tourist circuit; rather, it is a quiet suburban community of nearly 15,000 residents, close to the Elbe river. According to [Hamburg Stadt-Profil 2016](#), single-resident households totaled 41.7% and 25% of households had children. With this in mind, it is not surprising that store signs would allude to British aristocratic cultural codes.

English as a luxury commodity that signals tasteful modernity was also evidenced in what wares were sold, and how they were organized. A card shop prominently displayed German- and English-language Christmas and New Year's cards in its shop window, thus encouraging shoppers to associate English with gift giving, therefore encouraging linguistic consumption as well as material exchange. Additionally, an eyeglasses shop, *Schoneweg Optik*, linked its products with fashion by highlighting the "new" and "optik" in the store name in a stylish gray, whilst the other letters remained in white.



A peek inside another shop revealed sweaters organized by prestigious American locations—Aspen, Boulder, Vail. These are upscale ski resorts and destinations, whose names imply wealth, vacation, and a luxurious lifestyle. Yet to appreciate the image of upper-class that was being offered, one must know what these locations symbolize, which is social status.

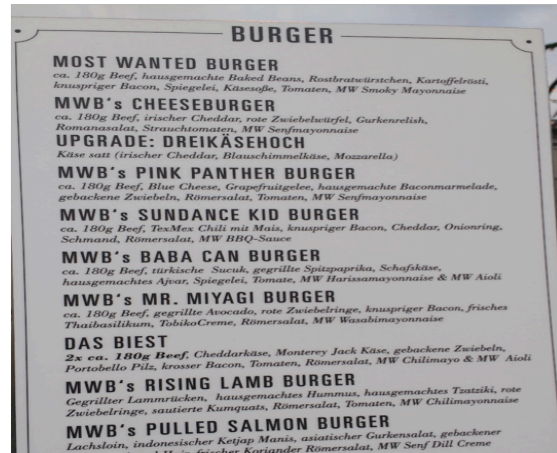
The deliberate emphasis on both the English and German languages in store names and goods shows the desire to portray fluency in

English as something desirable. The consumer is encouraged to equate the commodification of the English language as something representative of a high social standing.

Eimsbüttel—Straight Outta America

While shops on Eimsbüttel's Osterstraße displayed equal amounts of English and German signage, the type of assumed or implied cultural knowledge was different from that on Waitzstraße. This district leaned heavily on American English and an idea of Americanness. In this middle-class district of 57,500 residents, single-resident households number 68% and 13% of households had children. The average annual income in wages totaled €32,492. Because the spending power was lower than in Othmarschen, perhaps the proprietors aimed for the American ideal of "middle class" rather than an aristocratic ideal.

On Osterstraße, English and German occupied approximately equal space on the same storefront, which suggests that the proprietors wanted to create an intentional link between their products and social cache. Beauty salons, nail salons, restaurants, and coffee shops all had some signage in English.



From *Most Wanted Burger* (whose burgers had American names with German descriptions) to *Wax Cat Waxing & Sugaring* (services in English, details in German), businesses seemed to create an American aesthetic.



From the bold black and white logos at *Super Cuts*, to gingerbread lattes at *Carlos Coffee* (with explaining details below in German), to *Mito Salon—Hamburg's First Blow-Out Bar* (website details trends fresh from the United States), shop signs on the Osterstrasse emphasized edgy trends that break from tradition, unleash inner creativity, and are fun.



To further establish the link between freshness and American English, and to make this excitement accessible for German-speaking consumers who may not have a nuanced command of English, signs were printed in both English and German.

A sense of urban rebelliousness associated with American youth culture was also present. For example, *Mink's Bike Shop* sold mountain bikes as well as road bikes, yet their marketing leaned heavily towards non-conformity. Numerous stickers plastered the doorframe underneath the slogan "Elb Coast Psycles"—a reference to "Left / West Coast Cycle", which is a nod to Northern California mountain bike and surf cultures, both known for masculinity, breaking social norms, having fun outside, and

maintaining a youthful spirit. Also, the restaurant *Hamburg's Most Wanted Burger* alluded to outlaws, a symbol for lawlessness and the Wild West. This restaurant's claim that their burgers were the most popular is typical of American hyperbole, further underscoring a connection to and American worldview and a frontier mentality. By connecting images of defiance and fun with American English, the store signs seek to promote a mindset as well as a product.



The prominent placement of English signals that what these words represent is of equal value as the material sold. However, when one looked closer, the actual transaction details were in German, signaling that the image of fun, rebellion, freedom, or whatever associations a consumer might have with America were part of the marketing plan. In other words, I as an American could order a *Most Wanted Burger* Duck Hunter Burger in English, but because of the German subtext and details, I should anticipate the product, transaction, and experience to more aligned with German cultural expectations because the intended market is middle-class German consumers.

Linking German and American English on store signs seemed to create a tension that may not be evident to non-Americans. On the one hand, businesses want to attract customers, and with globalization, new ideas and products are readily available, which is exciting. If Anglophonic countries are seen as trendsetters, what better way to convey modernity than to associate a store name with an English word? On the other hand, when the link between language and product or experience is forced, a stereotype or a false expectation may be communicated. If the signs are created by non-

Americans for a non-American audience, the risk of flattening a culture or a concept into what Nigerian author [Chimamanda Adichie](#) calls “the danger of the single story.” By allowing others to communicate what is American, there is a risk that a stereotype or a fantasy is perpetuated.

Furthering the image of America as a place of adventure, *Tom Klee Outdoor Elements*, an outdoor clothier, sold high-end American products like Patagonia, Nalgene, and the North Face under a border of Anglophonic adventure sites: Martha’s Vineyard, Loch Lomond, Vermont. Further down the street, *Mad About Juice* sold smoothies, a trend made popular by young people in California seeking good health.

The connection between purchasing power and linguistic representation is being maximized by shopkeepers to benefit their customers—mostly local area residents as well as young people with disposable income who are attracted to an exciting district where the image of freedom, edginess, and rebellion are being sold.

Eidelstedt—Forging a New Connection

My final exploration was in Eidelstedt, my neighborhood. Of the 32,000 residents, 49% lived in single-person households, 19% of residencies included children. The average income was €15, 376; total amount of income per person being € 30, 938. These figures are interesting, as Eidelstedt seems to be a two-tiered community: working-class Germans and new immigrants, and established German middle-class families. Because the main shopping center, Eidelstedter Center, was being remodeled, I explored the surrounding commercial areas in Eidelstedter Platz and neighboring streets.

Like on Osterstraße, signs in English in Eidelstedt emphasized something positive and desirable. The *Fun-Reisen* travel agency emphasized “Fun” in prominent orange letters, whereas “Reisen” was in smaller black font. However, unlike the Osterstrasse, German was the dominant language. When English was present, words or phrases were usually placed in a subordinate or less pronounced position, or sometimes in a mixture that didn’t seem to be quite German or English. For example, ATU car

service offered “Glas-Service, Smart-Repair”. While *service*, *smart*, and *repair* are English words, the hyphen usage makes them look German.



Technology dealers, whose names might be German or not even posted, advertised their services in English: *Call Center*, *Internet*, *TV*, and *Video*. Perhaps these words are now part of German vernacular; perhaps English is a trendy shortcut. Additionally, English was found on local franchises, such as *Block House*, *Ernstings Family* and *Erden Market*. Businesses that offered international products such as Western Union featured that in English as well.

Like on Osterstraße, English was featured mostly in beauty salons and clothing stores, but with prominent German subtext to explain what services were offered. *The Barber Shop Only For Men* touted all their services in extensive German, *La Vida Fashion & More* sold women’s clothes, *Mai Nails* offered “American-Style” manicures and pedicures, and *Rewe City* sold groceries. Curiously, most restaurants did not have signs in English, *Block House* being the exception. However, businesses displaced by Eidelstedt Center’s renovation were temporarily housed in the *Shopping Camp auf Eidelstedt Center*.

This lack of English signage suggests that the proprietors assume a non-English-speaking clientele in Eidelstedt. The few signs in English deliberately link the English language with shopping and purchasing, in keeping with trends found in more upscale parts of Hamburg.



Because Eidelstedt Center is undergoing an upgrade, perhaps the developers want to encourage a more upscale image than what had previously been associated with the shopping center, and were using the social cache of English to do so.

However, because many residents of Eidelstedt are immigrants with varying levels of German, some grocery stores omitted words on signs in lieu of pictures of fruit and vegetables. This acknowledges a tension between the vision of the Eidelstedt Center developers and English who might be hoping to attract customers with more buying power, and the social position of new immigrants who lack linguistic, cultural or financial resources.

One exception was the *Punjab Shop – Asiatischer Lebensmittelmarkt*, a modest, independent grocery store selling groceries and household products found in Central and East Asia. While German was displayed in the largest font, all the smaller posters and fliers in the shop display were in English. This could be because English is one of the official languages in India; it could be that English is the language of business in East Asian countries. Whatever the reason, the proprietor wanted to attract the largest clientele, and English seemed to cross cultural and linguistic borders.



Where was English NOT Found

In all three districts, English was *not* found on shop signs involving money management or healthcare. Instead, banks, pharmacies, physiotherapists, psychologists, and doctor's offices displayed signs entirely in German.

As I walked past my doctor's office on Waitzstraße, I wondered why his office sign didn't disclose that he spoke fluent English. Was his bilingualism a back-pocket tool to be used in special situations, such as when foreign women who are German-learners need care during their pregnancies? Or, to establish that medical transactions would be done in German?

It could be that the intentional use of German-only signage is meant to signal a sense of seriousness. No one wants to joke around with their banker; a doctor's appointment means discussing health problems. These professions rely on discretion, keen judgment, and transactions grounded in fact. Perhaps the decision to display signage solely in German communicates an understanding of potential transactional risk, and the desire to minimize the margin of error. Anyone concerned with the competency of their banker or doctor— German native-speaker or immigrant alike— might feel calmer when they read the office sign in clear *Hochdeutsch*.

Interestingly, the real estate agencies in Othmarschen (*not* Eimsbüttel or Eidelstedt) flirted with English, slipping an occasional noun or adjective somewhere in their storefront display. From *Engel & Völkers Commercial Ladenfläche zu vermieten* to *PlanetHome Immobilien*, upscale real estate agencies linked English to expensive properties in highly

desirable locations, often modern homes with an Elbe River view. However, the handbills in *Hamburg Sotheby's International Realty* show window were all in German, perhaps underscoring the agency's image of "old money". Could it be that the realtors wanted buyers to link English with desirability, but only on a superficial level?



Concluding Thoughts—What to Make of All this English?

Back at Jim Block, I experienced a different understanding of what English signage could mean in the context of Hamburg. English seems to represent something fun and trendy. When the customer purchases a product from a shop with an English-sounding name, or enters an establishment that bills itself as American-style, they consume not only the material good but also an image that represents an idea symbolic of Anglophonic culture. Yet, these transactions take place in Germany; they are created by and for a German market, so they also evidence codes that signal German cultural norms. In short: the shops are German, the English makes them seem modern, fresh, edgy, and new. English is a marketing strategy.

With that understanding, I could cut into my JB Champignon Burger with a fork and a knife.

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