
“THESE SO-CALLED WEST TIMES”: THE POLITICS OF TALKING ABOUT THE HERE AND NOW IN CONTEMPORARY EAST BERLIN

Deanna Davidson, University of Michigan

The use of ostensibly simple words like “here” and “now” can be a complicated effort for post-socialist Germans. In order to talk about life “nowadays,” one must make implicit reference to the contemporary German state and the past Germanies. In order to generalize about how “we” do things, a speaker must position him or herself relative to publicly circulating ideas of nationality and belonging. The very act of choosing one of these words over the other, such as “back then” or “now,” requires the speaker to negotiate between/among identities and subjectivities.

General comments using simple words like “here” and “now” are covertly political, I will argue, regardless of the speaker’s communicative aims. Some speakers experience awkwardness and dysfluency when using these kinds of language, which I interpret as evidence of their cultural complexity. Therefore, in this paper, I discuss two such ethnographic examples and ways of talking regarding the present. My arguments are based on ethnographic research conducted in East Berlin, primarily among former employees of the East German light bulb manufacturer NARVA between 2001 and 2003.

The first example to demonstrate the complex nature of everyday speech about the present and the past is based on various conversations with my neighbor, who grew up in the neighborhood of the Light Works. She had learned curtain-making and operated a shop at the street level of our apartment building. Our conversations, referenced in the title as “these so-called West times,” took place in the stairwell of our building, where she and I had once shared a mailbox. One evening I came home to find her peeling her name off the box. It wasn’t necessary, she told me, since the delivery woman knows where she works and where to take her mail. She explained to me, knowing that I am not from here, that “In GDR times, it was always that way. One would know the postman, everyone who one came into contact with. It is less and less like that in these so-called West times because the Westerners don’t do it that way. It’s a shame that everything is changing.”

Monika’s tone of voice was more instructive than nostalgic. She instructed me, as would many of my fieldwork informants, on points of comparison between “these times” and “GDR times,” what it is now and what it was like then. This is a common topic of conversations even when an outsider, like me, is not the addressee. Comparisons have become the topics of everyday talks and created passionate debates, ironic comments, complaints, and philosophizing for young and old in the former East Germany. Generalities about these opposed settings have become more and more frequent. As a result, speakers feel that they need a kind of language or some vocabulary to make these generalizations about the “GDR times” and “Western times.”

The most common ways that I heard the present referred to was “today,” in opposition to “before,” “back then,” and “in DDR times.” But “West times” is also a way in which many talk about the present and it is a term of reference with which one takes a stance. It is used among former East Germans who view the so-called “unification” of the Germanies as an adoption of the East by the West. Indeed, the immediate implementation of West German institutions in the Eastern states after the fall of socialism required quick reactions to new institutional norms. Easterners suspect that the reunification has not been a marriage of two parts, but an adoption or even colonization of the East by the West. Many East Germans consider the place they live to be “West Germany” rather than “Germany.”

To demonstrate it I describe an example I observed in the case of the lasting productivity of the prefix West-. In the GDR, West- was used as a prefix to describe goods and often people who came from the West, such as West-Besuch, West-Tante, West-Paket, etc. (West-Visit, West-aunt, West-package). This prefix continues to be used to create new words, such as West-Schwiegersohn and West-Fahrrad (West-son-in-law, West-bicycle). Likewise, East—as in East-actress and East-roll (Ost-Schauspielerin, Ost-Schrippe)—is a productive prefix today. This prefix is used by older people and younger speakers alike, some of whom were in their teens and preteens when socialism fell. It betrays a categorization of things

and places as being West as opposed to the East, and is used by people who self-identify as Easterners when among other Easterners.

"These West times" refers to a present considered by some to be a West German present, though the speaker quoted here seems not entirely committed to these expressions. Monika talks about the present as "these so-called West times." Her use of "so-called" (*so-genannte*) distances her from the term "West-times." She implies that this is something that people say—a circulating way of referring—rather than a position to which she herself is committed. In Bakhtin's terms, the utterance is double-voiced, or "a word with a sideward glance" (Bakhtin 1984: 196). Double-voiced utterances, he argues, demonstrate the speaker's stance towards the words he or she uses. Perhaps the sideward glance at the term "West times" was for my benefit—an American interlocutor, and at the time of the exchange, a new acquaintance. Knowing the person, as I do now, a woman enamored of the service economy, an entrepreneur, and a proponent of all things, (in her words) which are "modern." I interpret the utterance as evidence of her non-alignment with those who view post-socialism as "West-times." At the same time, it demonstrates her membership in social networks with many who consider these times "West times" rather than their own. In addition, she takes a political stance in making a general statement about the present.

Let me offer as a second ethnographic case an example that illustrates the complexity of the language in use about the East and West. At a community center in the same neighborhood near the campus of the former Light Works, the theme of the day at the weekly women's breakfast club was the life and times of Marlene Dietrich. A point of debate among the women—all retired or unemployed—is the background of one of Dietrich's regular composers. The women were familiar with this man, who the presenter suggested was an East German who had moved to the West. "No, that can't be," Frau Gunther spoke up from the audience. "Er wohnt immer noch, so zu sagen, hier." "He still lives here, so to speak." "Oh, but he went West for a little while," the presenter insists. "I don't know, but I know he lives here."

From the discursive context of this exchange, we can learn that "here" means, in this instance, the East. The women debate the East-or-West residence of a celebrity, a recurring topic at the women's breakfasts. It is understood that if the

celebrity doesn't live in the West, he must live "here." This example, together with the first, demonstrates that East and West remain useful categories among East Berliners. Generalized comparison between "here" and "there" is also a frequent concern of these conversations; the group's shared history allows the referent of "here" to be commonly understood. The national "here" for this group has meant the GDR much longer than it has meant any other Germany, and it continues to make sense for the group as a social space. "Here" is a place that can no longer be delimited by national borders or represented with a passport, but it is nevertheless meaningful as a location for many speakers and their addressees. Speakers with whom I came into contact seldom used it to refer to the contemporary unified German state, the country one might consider most immediately available for direct reference. In fact, the only person who I regularly heard use "here" in this sense had been an activist long-opposed to the GDR, a vocal proponent of reunified Germany and the West, and even a supporter of the conservative party CDU.

Consequently, my main interest in this example is the phrase itself, "He still lives here, so to speak." Just as in the first example in which the speaker refers to "these so-called West times," this speaker utters "here" with a sideways glance: "so to speak." She similarly implies that "here" is a term used by others, a common way of referring, rather than a label she has crafted herself. The women at this gathering sat around a large table and I sat next to the speaker, who had showed great friendliness to me and had already invited me to her home several times. Although a socialist by conviction, Frau Gunther goes to special measures to orient herself to a reunified Germany. She attends this community center in the East, but also takes the bus to a West Berlin district to take part in a different center's art studio, Internet classes, and cultural excursions. I found it rare among women of her age, and generally among people from the East, to travel as much as she did, on a weekly basis, to neighboring Kreuzberg. Kreuzberg is Berlin's notorious neighborhood of Turks and hippies, and is both intimidating and distasteful for most people of her background. I give this bit of biography to suggest that her orientation to the present is to that of a unified Germany, and that her double-voiced use of "here" may reflect this political stance. The community center where this meeting took place is staffed through a make-work program for the unemployed and orients itself to an Eastern audience. In this

setting, "here" is a transparent reference to the East. Frau Gunther, while also using "here" in this sense, positions herself discursively such that the label is not hers, but that used by others.

Phrases like "here" and "these times" are of special interest to linguists, philosophers of language, and linguistic anthropologists. They belong to the class of words, called "shifters," whose meaning is especially dependent on contextual elements. The category is typified by shifting terms like I, you, there, and now. The meaning varies, dependent on who says it, when, and where. "These times," as in "these so-called West times," falls into this category because the meaning of "these times" varies depending on who uses the phrase when. "Here" is an obvious shifter, since "here" spoken in Bloomington refers to something different than "here" spoken in Ann Arbor. Shifters have been theorized by linguists and philosophers always to anchor their meaning in relation to the speaking subject, or ego. Linguistic anthropologists, drawing on the work of Roman Jakobson and his student Michael Silverstein, recognize that the context in which reference takes place reaches further than linguistic context and physical setting. Silverstein's student Hanks argues that shifters are sociocentric rather than egocentric. The "here" and "now" that shifters reference are subjective, emergent from everyday activities and experience. The organization of space is not natural or objective, as assumed by philosophers of language working with hypothetical English examples; rather, it is cultural. A common "field of experience," in Hanks' words, enables speaker and addressee to refer using shifting terms; in turn the use of shifting terms also aids in maintaining that very field of experience.

Hanks' work is helpful to interpretations of how my conversation partners in East Berlin often used "here" and "these times." "Here," referring to an imagined East Germany, does not rely on direct contextual evidence to make sense, as a philosopher of reference might expect. Rather, it refers to a non-place, a non-nation, and it draws on the understood shared history of speaker and addressee in order to do so. "These times" relies on shared understanding of events delimiting "today" from "before." The interlocutors share an understanding of space as organized in terms of "here" and "there" and of time as organized into "now" and "then." The meaning of "here" and "now" are not dependent on ego's situational context so much as both interlocutors' situation in

a commonly-understood social space, albeit one that no longer has an official name.

For this reason, I suggest, East Berliners seem to find "here" a useful term for making generalizations. It is commonly understood and is less bulky than "the former East Germany" ("die ehemalige DDR") or "the new states" ("die neue Länder"), labels preferred by newspaper editors and politicians. "These times" is similarly self-evident as a category with which one can generalize. People need, in their everyday lives, to refer to a place and time that exist in their field of experience and these shifters provide that ease of reference.

In this paper I have offered examples of two patterns in ways of talking about "here" and "now" in contemporary East Berlin. First, the use of shifters like "here" and "these times" demonstrates the field of experience in which speakers orient themselves. The place that is "here" is imagined; it and "these times" are identifiable by speakers and addressees alike due to shared knowledge of temporal and spatial borders. The DDR, though defunct as a state, continues to provide a point of reference in the way that many people divide up time and space. Using these simple words in this way reflects a culturally relative perception of social space and contributes to the perpetuation of the categories' meaningfulness.

Second, both speakers in these examples comment on the shifter they use. Double-voiced utterances, such as those marked with "so-called" and "so to speak," provide a view to the speakers' orientation to the terms of reference. I have heard "here" and "these times" used to refer to Eastern Germany in the post-socialist period both with and without the double voicing used in the given examples. This indicates diversity among the group of people for whom "here" is a meaningful place. Though using shifters like "here" or "these times" may be efficient (as compared to a phrase like "in the new states"), it also entails taking a political position. While using these terms of reference, speakers also enact personal orientation to the referent.

Common usage of time and place words is one way among many that speakers maintain an imagined East German community. Although speakers may have very different political views and may have considered themselves to have little in common during the socialist period, today they rely upon common points of reference in their

everyday language. Common terms of reference aid in the reproduction of the space as meaningful.

The speech practice of using relative terms like "here" and "these times" points to the inevitability of thinking with the term post-socialism in the East German case. Regardless of whether or not speakers use the terms with a double-voice, the categories of space and time are native categories, used regularly and to complex purposes. Many speakers find it difficult to talk in general terms about the present without making implicit reference to the past state or at least to the complicated choices of national identification that its demise has created. Thus, discussion of mundane matters—like mail delivery—quite easily become simultaneously a political statement.

References Cited

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