

Discourse Under Control: The Impact of SED's Language Manipulation in the GDR

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The German Democratic Republic (GDR), the youngest authoritarian regime in German history, operated for 40 years as a one-party state under the dominion of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED). The SED dictated the functions of state institutions and imposed a closed socialist worldview for which it claimed sole interpretative authority (Glaeßner, 1999). This interpretative power was facilitated significantly by the SED's control over all means of communication, including the press, television, and radio. This established information monopoly was accompanied by state-organized language manipulation, ensuring that the content and evaluations conformed to SED rhetoric.

Research on public language usage in the GDR vividly illustrates the extent of state intervention in the language of its citizens. Studies such as those by Pappert (2010) suggest that public discourse was influenced by SED norms. Typical for authoritarian systems, these norms exerted such a strong influence that GDR citizens were compelled to reproduce them actively under internal or external pressures, as deviations could result in sanctions (Galanova, 2019).

This reproduction of SED norms becomes particularly evident in public discourse, i.e., in letters to the editor. Letters to the editor in GDR newspapers provided a platform for citizens and political actors to engage in discourse. However, it is essential to note that these letters, although reflective of the SED dictatorship's language manipulation, are not direct representations of private language usage. Instead, they are editorially processed journalistic texts.

Still, an analysis of GDR letters to the editor reveals the reproduction of authoritarian language control and the categories invoked by writers to criticize the state or its enemies and position themselves within a collective DDR identity—a prerequisite for publication. This presentation delves into the complexities of language manipulation in the GDR, shedding light on its lasting impacts on individual and collective discourse.

This presentation utilizes a mixed-method approach, leveraging longitudinal data from 8.000 letters to the editors spanning three distinct newspapers from 1945 (pre-GDR) to 1993 (post-German reunification). This extensive dataset offers a nuanced understanding of evolving linguistic patterns and societal dynamics over the GDR's existence. Additionally, a membership categorization analysis (MCA; Stokoe & Attenborough, 2015) approach is employed for qualitative analysis, providing deeper insights into the categorization processes and communicative strategies utilized by writers to navigate the discourse under control in the GDR.

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