

The Soft Shell of a WordTM

On writing desire (pt 2) and the economics of linguistic control

by Charlotte Rohde

“This is why the semiologist is entitled to treat in the same way writing and pictures: what he retains from them is the fact that they are both signs, that they both reach the threshold of myth endowed with the same signifying function, that they constitute, one just as much as the other, a language-object.”

–Roland Barthes¹

¹ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Noonday Press, 1991), 113–14.

My current favorite language-object is an apple. Not only is it rich in Vitamin C, it also signifies to the world that I have an affinity for design – and it comes with a TikTok Dance and a slight feeling of superiority over people who like Taylor Swift. Following de Saussure's thinking on linguistics, the same word can mean something completely different depending on who uses it, or where it's used, or when and is depending on the rest of the words in the same sentence. That's where Apple (not saying which one) came in with a trademark. A trademark flattens language and stylizes the sign. In that specific moment, it freezes the immediate affect a word it is wrapped in and makes a new sign by swallowing its outlines. By the aesthetics of the signified Apple™, a new layer of affect is added. Sediments of affect start to form around words and harden over time. Like a mold, eventually it can be opened and the core can be removed. We are then left with the empty shells of words (*Worthülsen*).



These shells, consisting of layers of hardened affect, are now aesthetics removed from content, and are used to signal our vibe. They sum up a vague meaning, intangible and hard to pin down, but also carrying an immediate information of location. You studied art in a hip European art school in the late 2010s? You probably have used the word *cyber-*. What does that mean? Exactly that: that you “read” Donna Haraway, and whose ecotope (ideology) you were marinated in. And that information has an assigned value which is subject to the changing affects attached to it.

Philosopher Sarah Ahmed writes “The circulation of objects is thus the circulation of goods. Objects are sticky because they are already attributed as being good or bad. [...] If the same objects make us happy—or we invest in the same objects as being what should make us happy—then we would be orientated or directed in the same way. Consider that the word “promise” comes from the Latin *promissum* “to send forth”. [...]. Happy objects are passed around, accumulating positive affect value as social goods.”²

I want to read Ahmed again, but this time considering words (signs) as the happy objects she speaks about. Words circulate, are sticky and accumulate affect. Words are sent forth every day in every situation, written, spoken, performed, thought. It is easy to adapt a word from a TikTok video one doesn’t fully understand, first ironically, then accidentally more and more seriously, — *SLAY* — and they probably have made us happy. And the more they are passed forth, the more meaning they lose and the more affect they accumulate. It is no longer important that the word “slay” comes from the New York ballroom scene of the 80s and is deeply rooted in the most marginalized community of Black Queens battling the AIDS-Crisis, since Gigi Hadid used that word excessively as host of Project Runway. Following in the steps of RuPaul, it’s logical — if he does it in the same role, why can’t she? This is how words naturally get watered down and spread further (and the faster media we have, the faster the watering down happens). Similar to Madonna making Vogue — making the same subculture mass-marketable and thereby whiter and straighter? Valuation or devaluation? It’s ambiguous and depends on individual sensibilities.



² Sarah Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 35.

The internet makes it easy to encounter small signs of culture without ever having to engage with their background: sent forth here means being used, seen and imitated by other people. Knowing which words to use in which context (writing) is what is called “having taste”, being sensitive and knowledgeable about what is “good” (or trendy).

On the notion of taste, Ahmed writes “After all, taste is not simply a matter of chance, but it is acquired over time. [...] taste is a very specific bodily orientation that is shaped by “what” is already decided to be good or a higher good.”³

Having taste can directly be commodified. It is an indicator of class and creates an invisible line between the culturally literate and the illiterate. Taste is merely an indicator of cultural literacy and the ability to recreate/adapt to it while maintaining a personal note, and it is an indicator of how well we can (and also want) to “read the room” (or at least the specific room we want to be a part of because there are of course multiple. Usually one room of “good taste” contains a matching music genre, design style and a fashion style — the most common contemporary indicators of (sub)-cultural belonging).

If we feel the desire to belong, we want to associate ourselves with a “good” word to show that we also are worthy, niche, literate, cool (or went to that specific art school). The *goodness* accumulates by circulation and by being desired, it can generate capital.



³ Sarah Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 35.

An interesting example of semiotic literacy, and the absolute commodification of a single word linked to auto-iconoclasm is the millennial term “girlboss” — Let’s talk about it. Sophia Amoruso, 28 at the time, started a vintage clothes store from her ex-boyfriend’s apartment in Los Angeles, which she quickly turned into a huge e-commerce business selling fashion online. Her company was praised for being female-founded AND performing well financially (who would have thought a woman can do business?). Four years later, she appeared in Forbes’ 2016 list of ‘America’s Richest Self-Made Women’ above Beyoncé and as the second youngest contender (closely beaten by Taylor Swift). She later published and named her autobiography “#GIRLBOSS”, coining the term. While writing about putting in long hours, fEmiNisM and positivity, painting the ideal picture of a Millennial Businesswoman™, her company was in the process of being sued for firing pregnant and severely sick female employees. When this became public, Sophia the #Girlboss had to step down as She.E.O., but you know, at that point, failures don’t really mean anything. If you’re that far up the ladder, the concept of public critique cannot touch you anymore. For your investors, it’s only important that you are able to generate capital —and the shell of that word itself had long developed its own life.

These days she is still girl-bossing — literally — she’s founded a company called Girlboss Media that provides self-help guidance for female entrepreneurs. She also hosts rallies for other “Girlbosses” (travel expenses not covered by the already high participation fee). A quote on her Instagram page reads “Entrepreneurship is the last refuge of the troublemaking individual”, which in itself is a word shell: this quote is allegedly by Natalie Clifford Barney (1876 – 1972), an American lesbian writer who mostly lived in Paris. I cannot find the source of this quote, even though it is very popular on quotation websites for women entrepreneurs; but even if this (Jewish, but anti-semitic) feminist fin-de-siècle lesbian wrote this, it is quite out of context and outdated to apply it to modern day economics. But you do you, Sophia. So it seems there is actual delusion and/or belief in her own cognitive dissonance, of doing something right, of being a rebel, a feminist idol. Her idea of a girlboss split from the public reception of that term. Did she hold on to the original while all of us got to play with its shell?

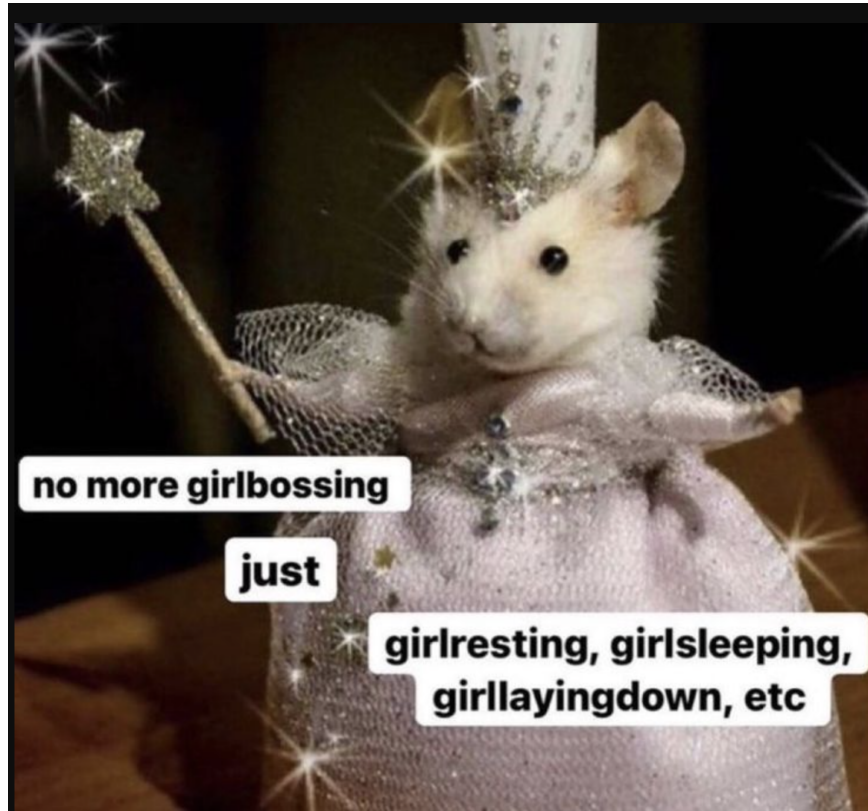


The word “girlboss” was empowering for women of my generation at first; women who started to outperform their male peers by being more disciplined and driven, but also more obedient (good girls) — but then, the word’s meaning suffered through Sophia’s debatable business strategies. Today, a girlboss is “not like other girls”, a “pick-me” (also gorgeous internet slang). She is a lone wolf, not running with the pack of good women. Sophia Amoruso invented, built up and also destroyed her own company and with it the self-coined neologism she used to name herself. “Girlboss, Gaslight, Gatekeep” was a popular meme online that illustrates how the word turned out: marking not a Woman making it on her own, but a woman who is just as rough or even rougher than her male pendants in the Big Economy Game; not a “girl’s girl”, but a bitter Millennial who only looks out for herself.

Interestingly, I am not sure if this is actually her fault — let’s talk about assimilation. Let’s talk about women executing patriarchal rules and standards over other women and, through this approach, winning at capitalism. Amanda Mull of The Atlantic states, “For the girlboss theory of the universe to cohere, women have to be inherently good and moral creatures, or at least inherently better than men.[...] The presumption of that difference between women and men is also what made girl bosses marketable.”⁴

⁴ The Girlboss Has Left the Building, Amanda Mull, published in The Atlantic, 25.06.2020
<https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2020/06/girlbosses-what-comes-next/613519/>

I remember desiring to be a girlboss — simply wanting to be successful and not being held back by gender norms — I desired to be respected in that way. I desired to belong. I used that word until it turned sour and I still feel a slight rush of shame when I remember using that word proudly. Nowadays, with GenZ, the perception of being “hardworking” also has changed. We no longer obey capitalism.



In an earlier essay I have proposed that aesthetics follow ideology. In it I argue that aesthetics signify belonging because aesthetics create a desire to belong. Daddy Žižek suggests that ideologies operate by manipulating and channeling desires. Ideologies offer fantasies and narratives that promise to fulfill our desires, even though they never truly can (and even though we don't actually want our desires to be fulfilled (yearning as a safe space)). Our desire persists by constantly shifting its object. And since our actual desires are partly unconscious, yet remain a driving force in us, we project our desire onto more concrete things: such as aesthetics. Aesthetics are tangible — much more tangible than an abstract desire such as belonging.



I call this a “Proxy Desire”: a concrete thing we think we desire because we cannot grasp the more abstract concept we’re actually longing for. Capitalism often makes our proxy desires products (that we never needed in the first place). And these products (or objects of our desire) are created and primed for our desire *by language*. Even though our word shells are hardened, they continue to gather and lose affect. Our perception of them changes over time, their connotation is subject to its associations or appropriations. Sometimes, these changes happen organically through speech, sometimes they will happen intentionally through skillful overwriting (usually propaganda, sometimes Charli XCX.)



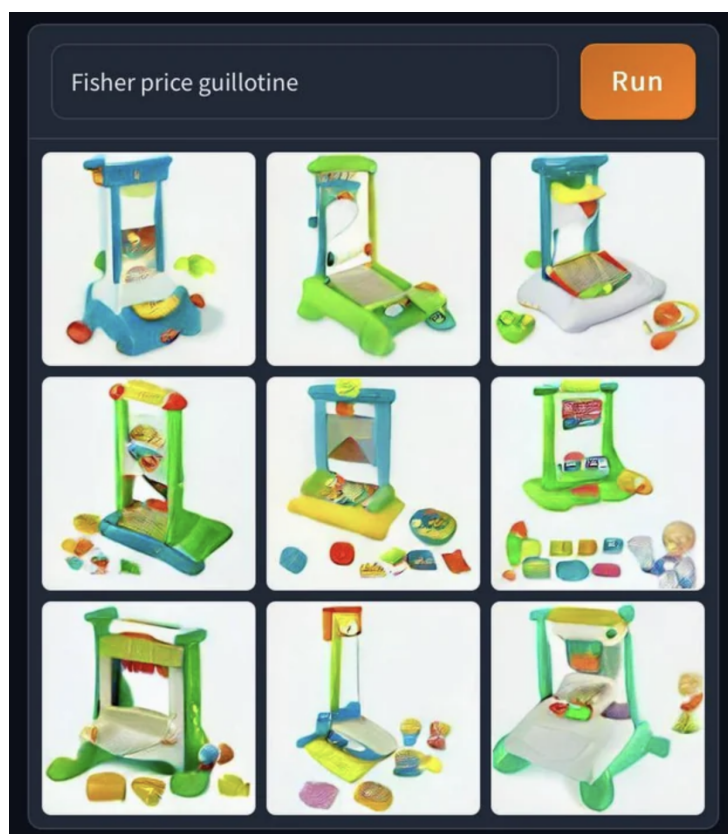
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This kind of (over-)writing requires literacy. And not only literal literacy, meaning being able to read glyph after glyph and form it to words, but also affect literacy/linguistic control: understanding the multiple layers of a text, its tonality, its references, its hypertextuality, its intention. What a text displays beyond the words it spells is also a language, an invisible, intangible language formed by sensibilities and taste. Being able to read and, eventually, write in that language can be a very powerful tool to navigate the semiotics/semantics which create our reality. Literacy offers access and therefore holds power, weaving the right *affect* into a text is to control the text's *effect*. In a time of social-media-distributed right-wing (but also left-wing) populism, we are reaching the limits of our literacy. I have fallen for rage bait, and I am sure, so have you. It has become so easy to share an “informative” instagram post about a distant geopolitical conflict, with very charged words, without fully reading or understanding it. We might share it because someone else shared it, someone we like and respect (or want to impress). We would never admit that that's why we shared it, but in an age of information overflow, it's hard to stay afloat. And we also can't stay silent, because that's choosing the side of the oppressor (in the above mentioned art school, we also collectively read Audre Lorde). So we rely on our peers, on the “Bandwagon Effect” (Herdentrieb), on swarm intelligence, on an accumulation of information that will become truth if we repost it often enough.

“When we choose to tell a story to others, we base the choice on our perceptions of how people will react to the story in their own minds. We will likely spread a story, whether it is a story about boom-time thinking or about economic despair, if we think that others will like the story enough to want to spread it further. [...] The stories that go viral are essentially random, just as

mutations in evolutionary biology are random.”⁵ writes Robert Shilling in his Nobel-Prize oeuvre “Narrative Economics”. Applied to language, he basically says that our choices of expression are guided by what we think others might like (or find “good”) — like Gigi Hadid, we use words based on association to something good. “*Slay*” could only become popular forty years later because of a completely changed image of the queer community. Being able to predict which linguistic choices will be popular? is an ability which wields monetary opportunity, and it is an ability that can be learned.

As linguistic beings, we desire to read and be read, to be perceived the way we want to be perceived, to have other people see us the way we want to see ourselves: literate, valuable, powerful. Writing our own image by language is maybe the most powerful skill, and while the desire of belonging with a majority might be quite present for many, others might discover the joy or the monetary opportunities of emancipating from and playing with it – a “Sprachspiel” we can start playing professionally.



follow me for more business advice ;))))
thank you <3

⁵ Robert J. Shiller, *Narrative Economics: How Stories Go Viral and Drive Major Economic Events* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 64.

