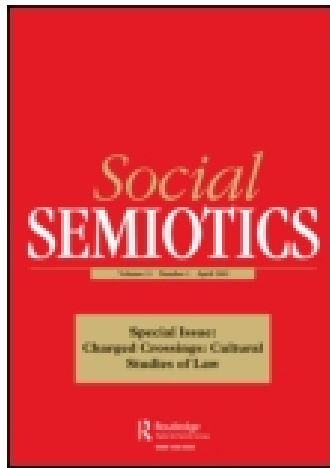


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RESEARCH NOTE

The ideological appropriation of the letter <k> in the Spanish linguistic landscape

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This research note deals with the so-called “political <k>,” i.e. the use of <k> instead of the <c> or <qu> prescribed by standard orthography in the Spanish linguistic landscape. This feature can be linked to the “politics of protest,” indexing writers’ anarchist stance or membership in radical, left-wing groups. In 2011, the Spanish bank Bankia used <k> in the tagline of one of its advertisements: *hazte bankero* (“become a banker”). This re-semiotization of <k> by Bankia has turned urban public spaces into a site of conflict and contestation. On the one hand, the bank trivialized a small but powerful symbol of political, grassroots dissent. On the other hand, it triggered resistance from groups traditionally associated with the use of <k>, namely the 15M Movement (*Movimiento 15M* or *MI5M*), who renounced to use it in its protests.

Keywords: political <k>; heterography; orthography; linguistic landscape

Introduction: the rise of political <k>

This research note concerns the use of Spanish “heterodox <k>” in *emplaced discourse* (Scollon and Scollon 2003) or *exposed writing* (Petrucci 1999), i.e. in written texts displayed in public spaces. I draw here on Sebba’s (2012) use of the terms “orthography” and “heterography” and his distinction between “orthodox” and “heterodox” spelling to indicate standard and nonstandard spelling conventions. This echoes Blommaert’s definition of “heterography” as “the deployment of literacy means in ways different from the orthodox ones, from orthographic ones” (Blommaert 2005, 252). “Heterodox <k>” (or “<k>”) is considered here as a contextualization cue (Gumperz 1982), allowing texts to be interpreted as “radical.” Therefore, I will also refer to it as “political <k>.”

The use of political <k> has often been associated with anarchist or radical leftist movements (Mey 1985; Rodríguez González 2006; Sebba 2001, 2003, 2007, 2012; Urla 1995). For instance, the text in Figure 1, “un desalojo otra okupación” (“one eviction, one more squat”) claims the right to occupy empty buildings as a solution to housing shortages. It appeared during protests against the eviction of the squatter *Casas das Atochas* in the city of A Coruña which took place on 11 April 2011.

The text in Figure 2, “torero muerto toro contento” (“dead bullfighter, happy bull”) was written on a billboard in close proximity to the *plaza de toros* (bullfighting arena) in A Coruña. It condemns bullfighting as a form of animal cruelty. In this case, the author’s anarchic or broadly anti-parliamentary stance is reinforced by the “Ⓐ” anarchy symbol.

According to Graziuso and Ghinassi (1976), Petrucci (1977), and Mey (1985), the rise of political <k> can be traced back to the civil rights movements in the USA and Europe

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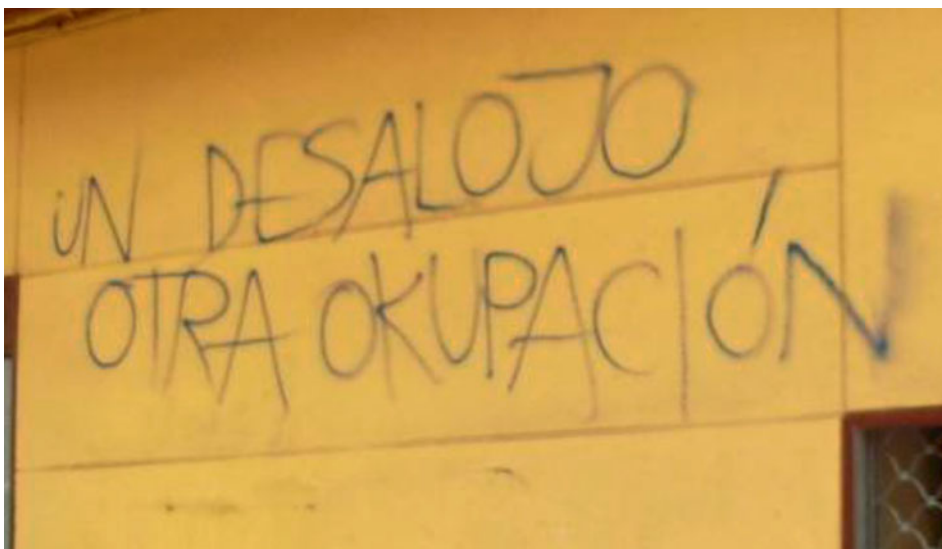


Figure 1. “un desalojo otra okupación (one eviction, one more squat)” (A Coruña, 2012; photo by the author).

during the 1960s and 1970s. This period saw an exponential increase in the spread of spontaneous, militant mural writing (Petrucci 1999, 178). For example, the militants of the Black Panther movement used to refer to the USA in writing as *amerika* or *amerikkka*, with reference to the acronym KKK of the Ku Klux Klan, to indicate the racism of the dominant WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) American population.¹

One of the earliest documented uses of political <k> appeared in the Italian translation of the title of Costa-Gavras’ 1972 film *L’Amerikano*.² In the film’s various movie posters, <k> was highlighted in red and was twice the size of the remaining letters in the title



Figure 2. “torero muerto toro kontento (dead bullfighter, happy bull)” (A Coruña, 2012; Source: Google Street View).

(printed in yellow or black). One of the themes explored by the film was the US government intervention in Latin America. According to Petrucci (1977), who considers political <k> an index of Germany and the German language, the <k> in the film title is a veiled reference to the initial of the then US Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, who was responsible for US foreign policy and most of the controversial CIA initiatives abroad at the time.³ In 1970s Italy, similar links to German-ness and Nazism, clearly not to be treated as synonymous, were made in the orthographic and typographic choices surrounding the spelling of Kissinger's name, which referenced the logo of the SS (*SchutzStaffel*) in <Ki4+inger>, in the same way that *Nixon* appeared with a swastika (卐) instead of <x>. Another example linking <k> with German is provided by the US edition of Franz Kafka's novel *Amerika*, which preserves the original German spelling of the country's name. Mey also traces the origin of political <k> in the USA back to the German language:

At the height of the US student movement of the sixties, America was often spelled with a <k>, supposedly to make it look more "oppressive" (the appropriate associations could be supposed to run from "German spelling" to "Germany" to "fascism" to "oppression"). (Mey 1985, 362)

As far as Europe is concerned, it is possible that political <k> and its subversive connotations first emerged in Italy in the 1960s as an American import, and spread to other parts of the continent where <k> was not orthographic, most notably in Spanish. On the other hand, the frequency of <k> in Euskera and the high visibility of Basque radical demands during the 1970s (including socialism, self-determination, and anti-Francoism) could have played an important role in the spread of <k> among Spanish anarchist and radical left-wing sectors (Sebba 2012; Urla 1995).

Having very briefly outlined the links between the use of <k> for expressing political protest and dissent, typically against the (capitalist) mainstream, in the following sections, I focus specifically on the use of <k> in the 2011 advertising campaign *hazte Bankero* employed by the Spanish bank, Bankia. I will argue that this orthographic choice constitutes an example of the semiotic struggle over symbols through their resemiotization in the urban linguistic or semiotic landscape (Landry and Bourhis 1997; Jaworski and Thurlow 2010; Petrucci [1980] 1986, 1999).

Hazte bankero: entextualizing, appropriating, and diverting political <k>

Bankia is one of Spain's main financial institutions, established in December 2010 by the fusion of the two largest Spanish savings banks – Bancaja-Caja de Ahorros de Valencia, Castellón, Alicante (Bancaja), and Caja Madrid – with five other minor savings banks. Both Bancaja and Caja Madrid were related to so-called Autonomous Communities (regional administrative units), in particular those of Valencia and Madrid. These two regions were traditionally under the control of the right-wing party, Partido Popular (PP), whose main ideological axes are neoliberalism, conservatism, Spanish nationalism, and Catholicism. Prior to the merger, both banks had been involved in huge investment and speculation schemes in the real estate sector, often with the help or the complicity of PP politicians who were often accused of being involved in cases of corruption. Bankia's CEO was Rodrigo Rato, the former CEO of *Caja Madrid*, former Minister of Economy for PP under both José María Aznar's Governments (1996–2000 and 2000–2004), and

former director of the *International Monetary Fund*. In the wake of the economic crisis of 2008, the speculative real estate bubble burst and Bankia was seriously affected, leading to huge funding subsidies from the Spanish government and the EU. In May 2012, Bankia was nationalized in order to avoid bankruptcy. Conditions of continued economic crisis became increasingly difficult and intolerable for most Spaniards. After several years of austerity measures and public funding cuts, a massive, popular political movement of protest emerged under the name “15M Movement (M15M),” in reference to the date of its first rally on 15 May 2011. People occupied public squares in the main cities, organizing rallies, assemblies, and protests. Radical slogans attacking capitalism, politicians, and bankers were displayed on banners. Many of them were written with <k>, for example, “bankeros asesinos” (“bankers (are) assassins”). Banks were frequently targeted due to their role in creating the economic crisis and due to the large subsidies they were receiving from public funds.

Under these conditions, in June 2011, around one month after the rise of M15M, Bankia started its “hazte Bankero” (“become a banker”) campaign which promoted the listing of Bankia on the Madrid stock exchange on 20 July 2011. The minimum offer for buying stocks was €1000, a sum which was, at least in theory, within reach of many Spaniards. The concept of this ad campaign was based on an idea of the “affordability” of the minimum sum required to become a bank shareholder. The slogan “hazte Bankero,” seen on billboards, in newspapers and on TV, was accompanied by images of “ordinary” people, sometimes identifiable as holding various unremarkable jobs – veterinarian, teacher, hairdresser, cook, engineer, etc.

One of the sources of <k> in the advertising slogan can be traced to the name of the bank – “Bankia.” According to Bankia’s internal style guide (Bankia 2012, 50) and the explanations provided (personal communication) by *Interbrand*, the company who managed Bankia’s public image, the name *Bankia* was chosen instead of the more common *banco*⁴ in order to give the name an “international” feel related to the English word *bank*. The ending *-ia* was chosen for its feminine, hence “sweeter” and “protective” resonances.⁵ However, even if the choice of <k> in “Bankero” was intended to ensure visual coherence between the ad’s slogan and the bank’s name, or was only meant to attract the public’s attention,⁶ its connection with political <k> is obvious. Coincidentally, other brands operating in Spain such as *IKEA* and *Movistar* also exploited the themes and tone of M15M in their ads.⁷

Bankia’s recontextualization (Bauman and Briggs 1990; Silverstein and Urban 1996; Blommaert 2005) of <k> in the ad, as well as in its name, appropriates the grapheme’s radical, anticapitalist ideology only to represent it as a possible index of the bank’s intended “mass appeal.” In doing so, the bank banalizes <k>, neutralizes its subversive charge, and reinserts it into a dominant capitalist discourse. The outrage against bankers as an elite, privileged group is reversed in the ad’s slogan; now “everyone can become a banker.”

This appears to be one of numerous other instances of the commercial banalization of once radical and subversive symbols. The ability of the capitalist system to belittle and nullify dissent has been well documented, for example, by Marcuse ([1968] 1991); see also Pignotti (1976), Butler ([1999] 2002), Frank ([1995] 2002), and Frank and Mulcahey (1997). In the words of Judith Butler:

Just as metaphors lose their metaphoricity as they congeal through time into concepts, so subversive performances always run the risk of becoming deadening clichés through their

repetition and, most importantly, through their repetition within commodity culture where “subversion” carries market value. ([1999] 2002, xxi)

The popular backlash against the “hazte Bankero” campaign was swift and occurred on a large scale with many counteractions in the Spanish semiotic landscape mocking Bankia’s ad. For example, Figures 3 and 4 show two altered Bankia posters.

In the former, the male model has an eye patch – a stereotypical attribute of pirates – which turns the (potential) banker into a “robber.” In the latter, an anonymous actor replaced the word “banker” with the word “person,” adding the text: “no som mercadera en mans de polítics i bankers” (“we are not goods in the hands of politicians and bankers”). The slogan is in Valencian and it features a heterodox <k> instead of the orthodox <qu> in <bankers>.

Left-wing activists linked to M15M claimed, on the Internet, to have spoofed Bankia posters. It is important to note, however, that the Internet was also a site for the circulation of spoofed ads. Some examples include the “banker” represented as a devil, with its stereotyped red horns, as a bandit, with the stereotyped black mask of a thief over his eyes, or as a prisoner wearing a striped, white and black jumpsuit. Some “ads” were completely redesigned with new images of repulsive individuals and rewritten slogans. In Figure 5, drawn from the website of left-wing activists N1, the “banker” is a man with a menacing facial expression. The slogan reads “hazte espekulador” (“become a speculator”). The poster preserves the highlighted <k> instead of the orthographic <c> as if the activists were reclaiming it from Bankia.



Figure 3. Poster altered by the left-wing platform *Asamblea del 15M Lucero* (July 2011). Source: <http://lucero.tomalosbarrios.net/files/2011/07/01-Hazte-bankero1.jpg>.



Figure 4. Poster altered by the left-wing platform *Democracia Real Ya* in Valencia (July 2011). Source: http://valencia.democraciarealya.es/post/7485889862/quiero-ser-persona-15mn-para-davant-labus-i#disqus_thread.

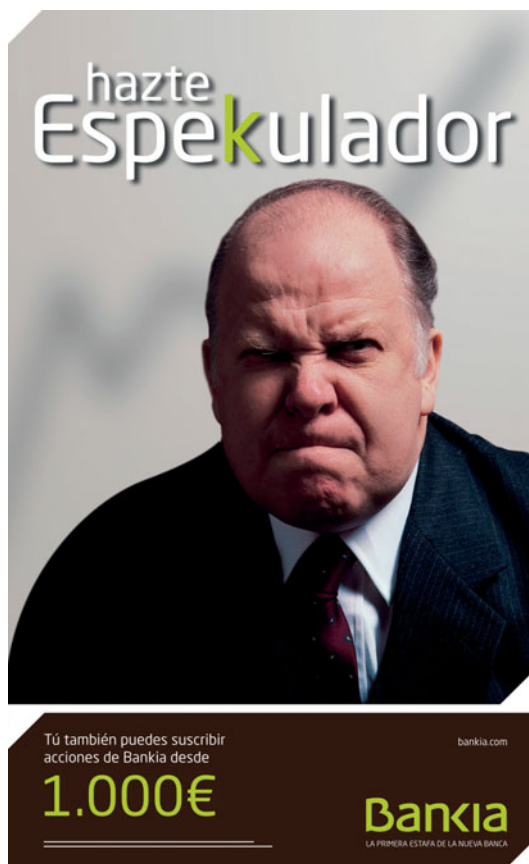


Figure 5. A spoofed poster ("hazte espekulador") from the website of activists N1. Source: <http://n-1.cc/file/view/478788/hazte-espekulador>.



Figure 6. The Madrid rally and the slogan “BANQUEROS Terroristas” (24 July 2011). Source: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/65912920@N07/6050044564/in/photolist-a5QifZ-adC4tb-a36mG2-dW2o6z-brBNPi-bm5qm3-8h8Smp-o5qPhY-7ZkaPG-9H1uik-9H1qdv-bwrpBe-cWiwC9-8GM64z-2C4owC-6mvcJo-7E8Mzz-dro1mo-bfyGr6-5oNLLJ-diZWFK/>.

Bankia’s appropriation of <k> was also subverted in other ways. On 24 July 2011, during one of M15M’s rallies in Madrid, one of the displayed banners read “BANQUEROS Terroristas” (“bankers (are) terrorists”) (see Figure 6). The word “BANQUEROS” was written in black capital letters except for the graphemes <QU> which were written in red, matching the red letters of the word <Terroristas>.

That capitalized and red <QU> seems to be a way of both reclaiming the political <k> from bankers by placing their institution “back” in the realm of standard spelling and mainstream capitalism, and taking the lowercase, political <k> away from them as unrati ed *authors* and *animators* (Goffman 1981) of the radical grapheme.

Final remarks

In this note, I attempted to show how the use (or nonuse) of certain orthographic and, to some degree, typographic choices becomes an important, widely recognized, commented on, and deployed resource in the ideological struggle between social actors with opposing economic, social, and political interests. Within the terrain of the Spanish semiotic landscape, political <k> has become available as a sensitive index of contradictory ideologies. For members of the popular anticapitalist M15M movement, it connotes nonmainstream, subversive stances in favor of social fairness, while for Bankia it is nothing more than a playful commodification of these values in the interest of

maximizing profits. Recontextualization becomes a key semiotic process in this struggle, where social actors with different degrees of perceived legitimacy and credibility claim and reclaim the <k> grapheme across the ideological barricade between them. The significance of political <k> in this political dialog cannot be underestimated. Its importance is most clearly demonstrated by <k>'s "rightful" users (M15M) or "inheritors" of the legacy of the civil rights movements dating back to the second half of the twentieth century, who renounce it when it seems to have lost its subversive charge (Figure 6). Activists thus reject Bankia's discourse using a synecdoche (*pars pro toto*) constituted by the "mere" orthographic and typographic feature of a single word.

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Notes

1. Note that the <k> in *Klan* is not orthographic (eng. *clan*), but rather a strategic heterography for giving visual coherence to the name (Randel 1966, 357; Quarles 1999, 31–32).
2. Italy-France-Germany coproduction (released in Italy on 22 March 1973), its original title is *State of Siege*, translated into Spanish as *Estado de sitio*, into French as *État de siège*, and into German as *Der Unsichtbare Aufstand*.
3. Note that, as the suffix *-inger* shows, *Kissinger* is a German patronymic.
4. Cfr. Banco Popular, Banco Pastor, Banco Santander, Banco Bilbao Vizcaya Argentaria, etc.
5. I thank *Bankia* and *Interbrand* for putting these materials at my disposal.
6. Attracting attention is the main function of heterographies in advertising (Ferraz Martínez 1993; Pignotti 1976; Sebba 2001); on the <k> in advertising, see Hall (1958), Klajn (1972, 160), Rando (1970), and Graziuso and Ghinassi (1976, 120).
7. For IKEA, see the spot "Tengo derecho a mi fiesta" (July 2011): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yOAIde7GYbs>; For Movistar, see the spot "SMS gratis" (November 2011): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g-KbmOCVEnM>.

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