

Rhetorical Strategies of Need

Linguistic and Psychosocial Dynamics of Begging Signs.

By Maja Jerrentrup

In recent years, poverty and homelessness have become increasingly visible in Germany, particularly in urban public spaces. Individuals without stable housing often rely on begging as a means of survival, using handwritten cardboard signs to communicate their situation to passersby.

Begging constitutes a specific form of social interaction in which no direct material exchange takes place. Therefore, it depends strongly on persuasive communication. Cardboard signs function as a highly condensed medium that must attract attention and prompt a response within a very limited timeframe. The spatial constraints of the medium require complex life situations to be reduced to one or few key elements.

This study examines the visual and linguistic design of such signs from a psychosocial and linguistic perspective, focusing on the communication strategies that underlie them. It is based on the assumption that individuals who beg – whether consciously or intuitively – develop strategies to address potential donors effectively. At the same time, it acknowledges that begging may not always be voluntary and can be shaped by external constraints.

The data for the present study consist of 42 cardboard signs collected between late 2024 and mid-2025 in the inner-city areas of Cologne, Düsseldorf, Essen, and Duisburg. To avoid influencing the situation, the texts were reconstructed from memory after observation instead of being photographed. Systematic interviews were not pursued due to linguistic barriers, misunderstandings, and the potential risk of creating uncomfortable or threatening situations for those addressed.

The cardboard signs display a high degree of formal similarity. Most consist of approximately 30 x 30 cm pieces of cardboard, typically handwritten and occasionally protected with plastic or lamination. The handwritten format establishes an indexical link to the individual and conveys a sense of immediacy and authenticity. At the same time, the simplicity of the material and design may evoke associations with poverty, limited access to education, and/or restricted technological resources.

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Orthographic and grammatical deviations are common. These features can be interpreted as implicit narrative elements, potentially pointing to migration backgrounds or educational disadvantage. In this sense, they function as a form of micro-storytelling, contributing to the overall communicative effect of the sign.

In terms of content, the signs frequently include brief self-descriptions such as “hungry,” “unemployed,” or “refugee,” which highlight central states of deprivation. In addition, many signs specify intended uses for donations, such as “for food” or “for medication.” These statements predominantly refer to basic needs, avoiding more complex or abstract forms of expression.

Direct forms of address, particularly “please” and “thank you,” are widely used and serve to establish a minimal interpersonal connection. More elaborate narrative elements are rare due to spatial limitations but are occasionally used to tell about personal misfortune, such as illness or loss of housing. Religious references appear only sporadically, and humour is largely confined to a specific subgroup, particularly individuals identifying with punk subculture.

The analysis suggests several recurring communication strategies. A central strategy is the emphasis on need, achieved through linguistic reduction, visual simplicity, and the focus on fundamental necessities. The combination of handwritten text and physical presence creates a personalized form of address that may enhance the perceived effectiveness of individual contributions.

Another key strategy involves the construction of interpersonal connection. This is facilitated through direct addressing, expressions of gratitude, and indications of unintentional hardship. The latter is particularly relevant in relation to the “just-world hypothesis,” according to which individuals tend to interpret social inequality as a result of personal responsibility. By emphasizing external causes such as illness or displacement, the signs can counteract such assumptions.

A further dimension refers to the interplay between similarity and difference. References to universal human experiences, such as hunger or illness, can foster empathy. At the same time, linguistic deviations or visual markers may highlight difference, for example in relation to migration or social marginalization. Both strategies can be effective, depending on the expectations and attitudes of the audience.

Attributions of character and moral disposition also play a role. Expressions such as “please” or “help” signal humility and

need, while other forms of presentation – such as humour or politically coded elements – offer alternative interpretive frameworks. In particular, signs associated with punk aesthetics may deliberately challenge social norms or appeal to specific ideological orientations.

Overall, cardboard signs used in begging can be understood as a distinct communicative form characterized by condensation, personalization, and situational adaptation. Despite their apparent simplicity, they exhibit recurring patterns that address both cognitive and emotional dimensions of response. At the same time, the necessary reduction of content may reinforce stereotypical representations.

The findings indicate that begging with cardboard signs should not be regarded solely as spontaneous behaviour but also as a structured communicative practice. Future research could further incorporate the perspectives of the individuals involved and examine the effectiveness of different design features in shaping responses.

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