

# Tattooing as Memorial Pragmemes

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**Abstract** This chapter considers tattooing in relation to personal memories based on a research project that was undertaken to determine both the scope and communicative value of tattoos among students of a university campus. The chapter presents the findings of this project and an analysis in light of a brief history of tattoos and the current research as well as social context.

The focus of this chapter revolves around the ritual evident among the large group of respondents who commemorate the death of loved ones by way of a tattoo. The analysis and discussion of the ritual is inspired by the work of Capone and Mey regarding pragmemes. An expanded view of a pragememe as a “speech” act is held in that the focus is on the communicative value of tattoos as a form of nonverbal communication – a very specific type of body language used intersubjectively – in this context of social and emotional bonding. Greeting is often used as an example of a speech act in the literature. The use of tattoos described in the context illuminated in this paper reveal that they are not on the other end of the spectrum as farewells, but rather salutations and commemorations on a continuum of relational acknowledgment. The tattoos used in commemoration are more than statements of facts or personal memories, but also social acts.

**Keywords** Commemoration • Intersubjective embodiment • Pragmemes • Ritual • Speech acts • Tattooing

## 1 Introduction

The history of tattoos began all over the world over 5000 years ago and appears to be as diverse as the people who wear them. Relatively recently, four primary functions of twentieth century tattoos have been identified; namely, that a tattoo functions, firstly, as a ritual. In a culture in which there are few rituals or rites of passage outside religion, the tattoo can serve (as it did for indigenous people who practiced tattooing) as a physical mark of a life event. A tattoo can also function as

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identification (individually or for a group); as a talisman to protect its bearer from harm; or as decoration (Blanchard 1994; Sanders 1989).

In what ways, though, do the past inform current, twenty-first century practices regarding tattooing among students? Moreover, in what ways are aspects of the present, past and future intertwined in the application of this language and, specifically, in funerary rites in which the dead are remembered? And, in what ways do current uses of this ancient language among students reflect the challenges of our changing world and the effects on the body and its environment? This chapter considers tattooing in relation to personal memories based on a research project that was undertaken to determine both the scope and communicative value of tattoos among students of a university campus in South Africa. The chapter presents the findings of this project and an analysis in light of a brief history of tattoos and the current research as well as social context.

The owner of the tattoo shop on campus was interviewed, and clients of the tattoo shop as well as undergraduate Communication Science students, a larger random group and young working adults of the same age completed a questionnaire anonymously. In a follow-up study on campus, Communication Science students requested fellow students to complete a slightly adjusted questionnaire as part of a class assignment. Thereafter, third-year Psychology students completed an adapted version of the questionnaire. From the finding that the category *Meaningful, symbolic, stories, special events* is the strongest reason for having a tattoo among all the groups, these tattoos cannot be merely skin-deep communicative signs.

The focus of this chapter revolves around the ritual evident among the large group of young, twenty-first century respondents who commemorate the death of loved ones by way of a tattoo. The analysis and discussion of the ritual is inspired by the work of Capone (2005) and Mey (2001) regarding pragmemes. Capone (2005:1357) defines a pragmeme as “a speech act – an utterance whose goal is to bring about effects that modify a situation and change the roles of the participants within it or to bring about other types of effect, such as exchanging/assessing information, producing social gratification or, otherwise, rights, obligations and social bonds”. In terms of Capone (2005:1357), pragmemes are, furthermore, situated and need to be embedded in a context of use, in social rules and constraints and in the cotext.

As the title of the chapter indicates, it is specifically the notion of ‘memorial pragmemes’ that is posited and considered in light of tattooing. ‘Memorial’ used as an adjective here can be defined as ‘created or done in memory of someone’ (Waite and Hawker 2009:579).

The chapter finds itself amid a year of countrywide reactions to monuments and statues started by student protests on another campus. Vladislavic (2015) reasons that the positive value of these reactions emphasize the meaning and non-neutrality of monuments and also reside in subsequent questions such as: Why are people so attached to monuments? What are their represented value(s) in society? What do they stand for? At the time of writing, students of the campus discussed here expressed their wish to retain two prominent statues on campus, in contrast to the demands at other campuses.

In this chapter, furthermore, an expanded view of a pragmeme as a “speech” act is postulated in relation to the focus on the communicative value of tattoos as a form of nonverbal communication – a very specific type of body language used intersubjectively – in this context of social and emotional bonding. Greeting is often used as an example of a speech act in the literature. The use of tattoos described in the context illuminated in this chapter lead to a consideration of these tattoos among spectrum of farewells, salutations and commemorations on a continuum of acknowledgment. The embeddedness of tattoos used as pragmemes in this regard in terms of rules, conventions, stories and social constraints culminates from my *Grammar of Tattoos* (Bergh 2014b) as well as the expositions in especially Conradie (2015), Norrick (2017), and Van Langendonck (2007). The overall framework is that of Cognitive Linguistics, with specific reference here to iconicity (proximity), prototypes (speaker, speech acts and polysemy), blending and conceptual integration.

Vladislavic (2015) argues that in order to live in a complex society and understand the way in which its values are represented in the form of monuments and statues, one needs a sense of irony – of self and of society. The exposition in this chapter revolves around tattooed persons that themselves become memorials and statues commemorating the death of loved ones. The arguments for considering tattoos used in this way as pragmemes relate especially to the paradoxes, irony, challenges and ambiguities surrounding tattoos.

## 2 Paradoxes, Irony, Challenges and Ambiguities Surrounding Tattoos

Body language has been described (Morgan 2002:1) as “a second source of human communication that is often more reliable or essential to understanding what is really going on than the [spoken] words themselves”. Tattoos represent a form of body language – in a very specific way, though. It also gives new meaning to the expression “reading a person”.

By modifying the body with tattoos, the individual has chosen to add permanent decoration to his/her body – and, from a Western marketing perspective, may be considered to be self-branded. Having this decorative function, tattoos are often associated with exhibitionism. Although there is an element of desire to reveal tattoos, there is often an equally profound desire to conceal tattoos. Revealing a tattoo has several functions, including showing the individual’s stylishness. Apart from questions regarding social media, the desire to conceal can stem from the deeply personal meaning of the tattoo or from a deeply embedded social stigma. While the tattooed person enjoys the positive attention from his/her peers generated by the tattoo, most of these same people feel embarrassed about the negative reactions and rejection from others, especially from friends or family. Also, even as tattooing becomes more prevalent, there still appears to be a persistent taboo on tattoos, particularly in job situations (Fisher 2002:101; Stein 2011; Brallier et al. 2011; King and Vidourek 2013; Dickson et al. 2014).

Sanders (1988 in Cesare 2011:39) views tattooing as a form of 'voluntary stigma' and 'mutual accessibility' that allow the user to simultaneously exhibit personal expression and find group acceptance. Several authors (*cf.* Fisher 2002:100) compare the decision regarding the latter with impulse shopping (in a group). Fisher (2002) points out that linking impulsiveness with tattooing creates a fascinating tension. for tattoos are, by definition, permanent. In respect of this, a distinction has been drawn between fashion, "as characterised by continual and systematic change, and those more fixed modes of dress which are relatively static, conservative and resistant to change" (Davis 1985:22 in Sweetman 1999: 62). Polhemus and Proctor (1978) and Polhemus (1995), in turn, distinguish between fashion and anti-fashion and consider tattooing, along with other permanent forms of body modification, as 'the ultimate' in anti-fashion and as such used to "maintain the illusion, if not the reality, 'of social and cultural stability'" (as quoted in Sweetman 1999:62).

In such a context of taking a stance, tattoos have been described as relevant forms of nonverbal communication (Aguilar 2007:2), "scars that speak and yet demand no reply: assertions of what is, frozen in the flesh" (Benson 2000 in Aguilar 2007:2). To Lloyd (2003 in Aguilar 2007:2), a few years later, tattoos are similarly "a way of committing to something permanent and stable, of recording who and what you are right now".

It was Aguilar's (2007:2) phrase "scars that speak" that gave origin to this chapter and the inquiry into how a written record can be a speech act, and – moreover- a memorial pragmeme, in terms of the way it is used among participants of the study reported on here.

### 3 Results

The 2012 and 2013 students' reasons for having a tattoo are summarised in Table 1 below (*cf.* Bergh 2014b). The categories were not specified as choices, but followed and were systemised from the respondents' answers.

Participants in the 2012 groups were merely requested to supply a reason for having a tattoo, but several of them spontaneously explained the tattoo and related their story, while some of them also voluntarily offered photos of their tattoos – including the concealed ones. For instance, a participant would explain that he got the tattoo when his brother died and that it is a dolphin – his brother's favourite animal. They were willing to share this in a safe, personal, face-to-face situation.

The questionnaire distributed to the 2013 group formed part of a third-year Communication Science assignment in which the students also had to write an essay about tattoos. The questionnaire used included two additional questions, namely: May we take a picture of your tattoo to attach to the questionnaire? and What did the tattoo cost you? The first of these two questions was included to fathom their communicative intent and mode more accurately. Very few participants answered this question. A few answered yes and several no. Among the latter group,

**Table 1** Primary reason for tattoos among participants with tattoos

	2012 groups			2013 group
	Communication students n = 46	Other students n = 143	Young working adults n = 23	n = 537
Valued the pain	2	1	0	2
No reason	3	0	2	9
Fun, cute, cool, just wanted to do it	8	18	4	99
To feel young again	2	2	0	0
Meaningful, symbolic, stories, special events	14	45	7	184
Uniqueness, self-expression	3	10	1	60
For attention	1	5	0	16
Peer pressure, influenced by others	6	23	2	52
Like the designs, body art, decorations	5	20	5	60
Personal	1	3	1	11
Seems interesting	1	3	0	6
Fashion	0	2	1	11
Addictive	0	1	0	4
Relieves stress	0	3	0	2
For improved self-esteem	0	2	0	3
Rebelled	0	5	0	3
Permanence	0	0	0	15

especially, there were participants who indicated that they would be willing to participate in a confidential interview.

In most cases – and in contrast to the 2012 groups where a two-thirds majority of tattoos were visible – only one tattoo (out of two or three) was visible. As previously, most respondents with tattoos were planning more for the future. The 2013 patterns concerning the reasons for having a tattoo correspond with those of the previous groups – as is reflected in Table 1. A new category, Permanence, emerged from this group as a reason for having a tattoo. To some respondents, tattoos were their most permanent possessions.

The patterns concerning the main categories also emerge among the results of the 2014 Psychology group. They aptly revealed a more developmental, long-term perspective on permanence in that they aired concern in making the right choice for a design.

## 4 Discussion of the Results

The findings reveal that the tattoos counted were not predominantly determined by tradition, given the few parents with tattoos; that the majority were visible all the time, but many not; and that very few tattoos were deliberately chosen to communicate a rebellious message.

The category *Meaningful, symbolic, stories, special events* represented the strongest reason for having a tattoo across all groups. The three other categories that featured strongly were *Like the designs, body art, decorations*; *Fun, cute, cool, just wanted to do it*; and *Peer pressure, influenced by others*. In the 2013 group especially, the category *Uniqueness, self-expression* also featured strongly.

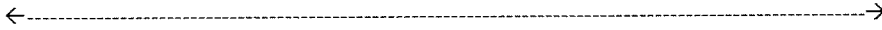
In the initial stages of the project in 2010, the owner of the tattoo shop pointed out that remarkably many clients get tattoos for the sake of the pain. According to our findings, that strong trend has now subsided – although there is a return to an original ritual of capturing personal meaning. This ties in with international findings among students (Cesare 2011) where it is no longer so much about the act of getting a tattoo, but about how tattooing is used in an individual way.

The use of tattoos by the respondents in this personal regard in our study also corresponds with some principles of effective professional personal branding (Rachelson 2010:76) in that it makes the person memorable; has a unique touch; develops a story about the person and their life journey; is compelling and evokes emotional reactions – but then in a very personal way, focused on intra-personal communication and mostly self-image (how they see themselves) and self-worth rather than image (how others see them). Tattoos are added as a personal story or artistic picture unfolds, and not generally for the sake of competition or as prescribed by culture.

Several respondents indicated that they were motivated by peer pressure, especially among the student groups. Tattoos do function as items that provide group membership among the respondents, but in the sense of belonging – yet no longer being one of a group that can tolerate the pain, or a category for the sake of competition. Tattoos do function as artful body decorations and accessories.

All the student groups as well as the young working adults resorted to the use of tattoos by the working class in the late nineteenth century (Fisher 2002) for the sake of *expression*. The expression of identity among these respondents does, however, not focus on identity domains that are highly profiled in a materialistic sense in consumer culture, namely 'the good life' against the background of a search for happiness and a perfect body (Dittmar 2008). The majority of life events tattooed in our study relate to sad or traumatic events.

Although several participants consider their tattoos to be possessions, most tattoos were chosen for relational reasons. As pointed out in Bergh (2014b) frequency needs to be seen in combination with other factors in determining the prototypical centre in the category *Meaningful, symbolic, stories, special events*. Among the symbols recorded in this category, religious symbols – and specifically crosses – satisfy the criteria for filling the prototypical centre. The grammar (Bergh



**Fig. 1** Personal branding continuum (Bergh et al. 2013)

2014b) thus truly goes beyond what is correct, for religious references are still often considered inappropriate as conversation topics. The starting point and foundation of interpersonal relationships in the prototypical centre is not with a subculture as such, but with their Brother – whose death for them they commemorate via a tattoo.

The above in addition leads to a required consideration of the findings from a self-branding perspective. For the purpose of dealing with diversity and individuality in the use of tattoos in the groups examined and in view of generalisation, Bergh et al. (2013) posit the following continuum from an integrated marketing communications perspective (Du Plessis et al. 2003; Jooste et al. 2009) in relation to the analytical framework presented there (Fig. 1).

The view concerning self-esteem presented in Bergh et al. (2013) links up with Cesare's (2011) postmodern perspective on the searching self in a constantly changing milieu. The postmodern spirit requires one to remember the fluidity of things and guide the aim for continuum-views of categories together with the Cognitive Linguistics approach assumed here in terms of diagrammatic iconicity (proximity), prototypes (speaker and speech acts), and polysemy (*cf.* Van Langendonck 2007). Speech in relation to writing is then also not viewed as binaries, but rather on a continuum with the potential for hybrid manifestations.

Our continuum may also guide other social actors in “reading and listening to a tattooee” in terms of tendencies and potential reactions.

The social role a consumer assigns to a brand can affect consumers' interaction strategy with the brand (Gensler et al. 2013:250). As such, the brand may be seen as a mere acquaintance with the need for only infrequent, superficial interaction (i.e. weak tie) or be elevated to the status of a friend (i.e. strong tie) who shares more intimacy with the consumer and has more power to shape the consumer's thought processes and actions. In the most intimate scenario, the brand may even be considered a family member who becomes an integral part of the consumer's life. To this end, Aggarwal and McGill (2012 in Gensler et al. 2013:250) differentiate between brands as partners and brands as servants. In my view, the analysis of the results in this study leads one to conclude that the tattoos representing the personal branding of the participants are *closer* to them than any brand, even their own personal brand in other respects (such as a story cloth, as explained by Van der Merwe 2014). An example from the 2013 group expresses something in this regard: “All of my tattoos have symbolic meaning. I got them, because they made me feel closer to people I hold close to my heart”. This structure designed from our study captures this in that it provides for outgoing radial extensions with brands as family, then friends and then as servants – for various levels of branding (Fig. 2).

For our participants, *permanence* would also be seen as a determiner of the role assigned to a brand, given examples such as the following from the 2013 group: “I

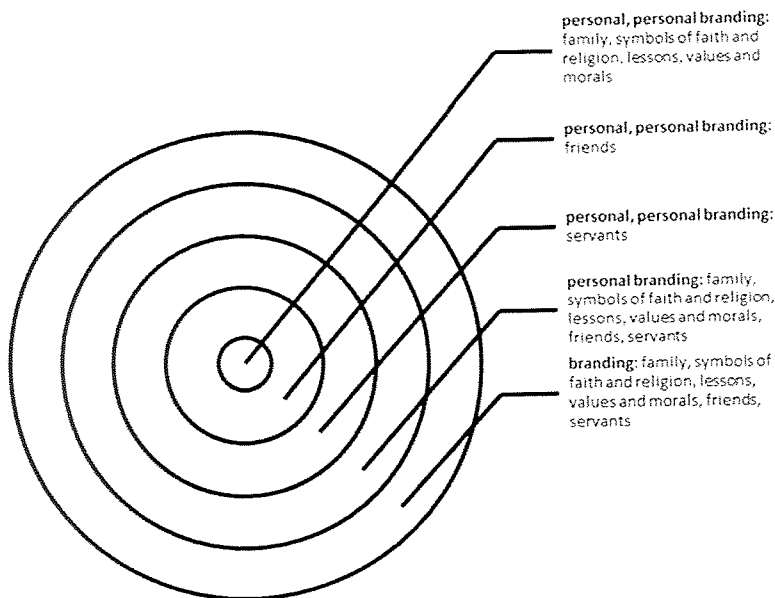


Fig. 2 Radial branding relationships (Bergh 2014a)

love body art and because tattoos are meaningful and permanent unlike other stuff in life that fades (i.e. friendship and relationships)". And, "I wanted to have my daughter's face on my body for eternity".

## 5 Characteristics of Commemorative Tattoo Texts

Commemorative tattoo texts in our study can be considered as not only stories, but also speech acts after the analogy of the exposition in Conradie (2015) and their similarity with oral narratives. Commemorative tattoo texts in our study similarly reveal iconicity in terms of the prototypical 'speaker' and the prototypical symbols (crosses) and the way in which the action of getting a tattoo coincides with the action of memorialising or even immortalising. In line with the development described in Conradie (2015) several of them are indexical (as for instance in the case of the dolphin tattoo discussed above) and more frequently so than in runic inscriptions. Their deictic centre resides especially in spatial deixis (in terms of proximity and embodiment) as such, with linguistic deixis requiring conversation and explanation concerning 'this tattoo'. These tattoos need to be described not only as speech acts, but also as memorial pragmemes.



## 6 Stories in Story Slots

Norrick (2017) argues that “pursing lips, nodding and leaning back are all behaviors which clearly can only derive their meaning from context (the slot they fill), where they realize behavioremes” in the terminology of Pike (1967) and pragmemes in the terminology of Mey (2001) and Capone (2005) and others. “Lip pursing, nodding and leaning back develop meanings only in specific interactional contexts, and our interpretations of them must work from these contexts to the particular behaviors . . . the analysis must begin with the cultural, contextual slot to see how the behavioral/linguistic unit fits and not the other way around.”

For an understanding of narrative, in terms of Norrick (2017), the starting point is that stories in conversation occupy slots and so fulfil functions. Furthermore, story/narrative is a text type, not a pragmeme – while in illocutionary terms, narrative is a *representative* speech act in that it describes people and events in the past. In the determining conversational slot, this representative act can realize the force of, for instance, a confession and so instantiate an illocutionary force (or pragmeme) different from the representative force.

Norrick (2017) explains that besides rituals such as children asking for stories at bedtime, certain events call for stories and provide specific slots for them; for instance, memorial services that provide slots for stories about the deceased.

The following represents one comment by a participant in the 2012 young working adults group:

My body is a canvass and I like to show through my outer body art who I am inside as an artist.

Together with personal, personal branding; the irony and unexpectedness related to the use of tattooing to memorialise in a context where this could be the very reason against tattooing based on Old Testament norms; innovation and creativity in the way in which tattoos are used among the participant groups in this study; and ‘for their own sake’ require one to think in terms of conceptual integration and a complex blending of the contextual story slot with the constructed embodied memorial pragmeme (Turner 2007: 383). Turner (2007:378) reminds us that “running multiple mental spaces, or more generally multiple constellated networks of mental spaces, when we should be absorbed by only one, and blending them when they should be kept apart, is at the root of what makes us human”.

From a conceptual integration perspective and in view of a verbal discourse involving a specific commemorative tattoo, the role of mental spaces are such that they are set up dynamically throughout ongoing discourse on the basis of linguistic and non-linguistic clues and information” (Fauconnier 2007:365). Furthermore, “mental spaces are built up dynamically in working memory, but a mental space can become entrenched in long-term memory” (Fauconnier 2007:352).

The following statements represent some of the 2013 participants’ reasons for getting a tattoo. They illustrate the phenomenon that they characteristically commemorate and acknowledge the other person in the relationship, yet also are

very much personal reminders and for personal sustenance, and that they are considered to be 'saying' something:

It belongs to you and no one else.

My tattoos are a reminder of where I've been and where I want to go.

Memorabilia, it is moments captured and painted onto the canvass of my life. My tattoos will live on in the intentions of the universe.

Some things you can't say in words, your body will say it for you. My tattoos was and still is a journey only I mapped it out for myself.

From a very young age, I noticed how I would change, how my perspective would change with my environment, how I would feel different about life. This was good for most of it, but we seem to lose innocence and sincerity, passion and motivation with age. We care less about living in every moment, and almost age by forgetting to live . . . Often I would lose valuable memories, life lessons and moments based on this change that occurred more often than not. Every single one of my tattoos carry a strong story or message that I do not want myself to forget. No matter where I am or how old I am, my tattoos are lessons etched into my skin. They will be with me forever.

Norrick (2017) explains "that narrative is the standard conversational resource for describing what happened, but not necessarily for expressing feelings, in traditional speech act terms, so that narratives initially, from the inside out constitute representatives rather than (direct) expressives, though they can certainly function as indirect expressives", which would be the case concerning commemorative tattoos. Norrick (2017) goes on to explain that "both first person and third person narratives may work primarily/entirely as representatives for the entertainment and/or enlightenment of listeners, though first person stories will generally involve positioning, alignment and stance-taking on the part of the teller with consequences for identity construction. Particularly imagined stories about non-real persons (fiction, as when one tells a fairy tale) may remain rather free of evaluation and ramifications for the teller's personal identity", which is then not the case with tattoos manifesting a real-life relationship.

A final reference to Norrick (2017) concerns the commemorative tattoos in this study and their relationship to oral narrative tradition: "Remembering together solidifies stories into family stories for those involved in telling and listening. Some experiences receive narrative form and are internalized as pieces of biographical memory, perhaps for all the members of a family or other group, just as the telling of a story may be recalled. Consideration of co-narrated family stories suggests that they are co-produced pragmemes, dependent on coordinated interaction between two or more participants. They are like chanting, speaking in unison or call and response interactions in religious services, at sporting events and so on where multiple voices are required to instantiate the appropriate pragmeme. For such cases we must recognize various kinds of co-produced, polyphonic pragmemes".

## 7 Conclusion

In a postmodern context and era of instant messaging, most young people in our study seek permanent, meaningful signs and resort to the ancient language of tattoos.

In a changing environment, innovation and creativity are often keys to survival. In our study, innovation and creativity as manifested in tattoos are not used strictly speaking in this sense, nor for commercial purposes – but rather as the preservation of self and the celebration of memories, art and youth, and as a token of permanence. I consider tattooing among the majority of the respondents as a form of personal branding that I prefer to call personal, personal branding. Yet, such branding and associated ritual is situated in the context of a complex society with its norms and conventions.

The focus of this chapter revolves around the ritual evident among the large group of respondents who commemorate the death of loved ones by way of a tattoo. The analysis and discussion of the ritual was inspired by the work of Capone and Mey regarding pragmemes. An expanded view of a pragmeme as a “speech” act is held in that the focus is on the communicative value of tattoos as a form of nonverbal communication – a very specific type of body language used intersubjectively – in this context of social and emotional bonding. Whereas writing provides closure and a way of dealing with emotional pain, it does not necessarily provide the completion that results from the spoken conversation surrounding it.

Whereas greeting is often used as an example of a speech act in the literature (*cf* Bergh and Cawood 2015; (Wierzbicka this volume)), the use of tattoos described in the context illuminated in this paper reveal that they are not on the other end of the spectrum as farewells, but rather salutations and commemorations on a continuum of relational acknowledgment. The tattoos used in commemoration are more than statements of facts or personal memories, but also social acts.

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