

University of Hong Kong Seminar (Monday February 5th, 2007)
(Un)Critical Literacies on the Net? Culture Jamming and the Geopolitics of English
Brian Morgan, York University

Abstract

The Internet has become a crucial site for a wide range of anti-globalization activity: from the mobilization of protesters at IMF and World Bank meetings to digitized forms of “writing/imaging back” that utilize the multimodal and hypermedia environment of the Internet in the subversion of images and texts used to normalize market-based ideologies. The extent to which this latter activity—often termed *culture jamming*—can undermine global capitalism remains to be seen. Rhetorical techniques of parody subvert by way of humorous appropriation and imitation. Circulated via the Web, however, the localized, intertextual allusions that support these parodic activities can be lost, resulting in weakened or contradictory modes of “writing back”—comedy without critique, in the eyes and ears of the uninitiated.

An intriguing example is the presence of websites devoted to collecting, displaying and commodifying interlanguage phenomena, one of the most notable being *Engrish.com*, a website that celebrates the “error”/creativity of primarily Japanese learners/users of English. The mixed and multiple messages of *Engrish.com* will be foregrounded in this presentation. Through carnivalistic laughter (cf. Bakhtin), such sites can be seen as subverting the standardized and nativized codes that underpin centre-based dominance of the English Language Teaching industry. Yet, such laughter is bi-directional in that the most humorous—hence exotic, from an Anglo-centric perspective—are selected for branding on t-shirts and other products available for purchase on-line. Thus, while “writing back”, these sites also write in support of the dominant cultural, economic, and linguistic forces that underpin globalization.

The presenter will begin with a brief summary of both utopian and dystopian perspectives on globalization and the geopolitics of English. He will then describe his inadvertent introduction to the activity of culture jamming through students’ research and writing in a content-based, English for Academic Purposes course he has taught. Following description and analyses of several Internet examples, the presenter will examine the “mixed messages” of *Engrish.com* and their broader implications for critical literacies and multimodal practices in English Language Teaching.

Context 1: Joint AAAL and ACLA/CAAL Conference, Montréal, June 17th, 2006.

Colloquium: *Textual (ex)tensions: “Writing back” to neo-imperial contexts and ideologies.*

Abstract

This colloquium offers diverse perspectives on how terms such as “writing back,” “Empire,” and “resistance”—typically associated with postcolonial scholarship—are relevant in a variety of neo-imperial educational contexts.

Paper Titles

Multimodal Englishes as sites of resistance in Ugandan schools

Bonny Norton & Harriet Mutonyi

“Writing back” by shuttling between discourses from the academic periphery

Suresh Canagarajah

“Writing/imaging back”. Mixed messages from the Net

Brian Morgan

Writing by right: Indigenous writing in Brazil as resistance to assimilation

Lynn Mario Menezes de Souza

Talking across time: Postcolonial challenges to language, history and difference

Vaidehi Ramanathan & Alastair Pennycook

Context 2: Genesis of an “Accidental” Research Project

Content-Based English for Academic Purposes Course: *Language and Public Life* (LNG 2000, Ryerson Polytechnic University), *English in Use* (ESL 2000, York University).

Course Description:

“Language is not neutral or objective. It is often framed by cultural and institutional perspectives; language represents, creates, and reflects social perspectives of the world, of reality. Along with the importance of agencies like schools and businesses, the sophisticated technologies of media and communication networks affect and reflect the way we talk and write to each other and the ways we see the world” (Hunter & Morgan, 2001, p. 102).

Conceptual Underpinnings:

1. A Multiliteracies Framework (New London Group, 1996; Lotherington, 2003): Persuasive texts are constructed not only with words, but also images, sounds, spaces, and their combination in multimodal formats.
2. Critical EAP (Benesch, 2001). *Language and Public Life* is based on a notion of cognitive academic language learning, identity negotiation and critical social inquiry as inter-animating, co-developing processes (Cummins, 2001).

Assignments: 1. Comparing two print ads (500-750 words) 2. Analysis of a public language event (group oral presentation) 3. Major research essay on a social issue or recent current event (1200-1500 words) (prior small assignments: annotated bibliography; analysis of a related website).

RESOURCES: Developing a “Metalanguage/Tool Kit”

Videos: Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media, Killing us Softly 3, Pack of Lies.

Key Articles: Lutz, Corbett, Schlosser, Birk & Birk.

Teacher References: Berger, Danesi, Hill & Helmers, Kress & van Leeuwen, Rutherford.

Endless Laundry, Endless Detergent: A Student’s “Misreading” of a Spoof Ad

Stumbling upon the Culture Jammers’ Network: A Manifesto

“We are a global network of artists, activists, writers, pranksters, students, educators and entrepreneurs. We are downshifters, shit disturbers, rabble-rousers, incorrigibles and malcontents. We are anarchists, guerrilla tacticians, neo-Luddites, pranksters, poet, philosophers and punks. Our aim is to topple existing power structures and forge a major shift in the way we live in the 21st century. We will change the way information flows, the way institutions wield power, the way industries set their agendas. Above all, we will change the way we interact with the mass media and we will reclaim the way in which meaning is produced in our society.”

Adbusters Organization (n.d.). Culture jammers network. Retrieved July 23, 2005 from <http://adbusters.org/network>

IMAGE REFERENCES

1. “Prozac.” Adbusters Spoof Ad. Retrieved January 28th, 2007 from <http://adbusters.org/spoofads/index.php>

2. "Oswald in a Jam." Retrieved January 26th, 2007 from <http://www.doctorcosmo.com/oswald/oswaldillustration.html>
3. "Mount Rumsfeld National Park." Retrieved January 26th, 2007 from <http://www.bushflash.com/jpg/rum.jpg>
4. "Public Enemy." *Eye Weekly* [Cover, December 28th, 2000]. Retrieved January 28th, 2007 from <http://www.eye.net/eye/issue/issue%5F12.28.00/>
5. "The Busheviks Great Leap Forward." Retrieved January 28th, 2007 from <http://www.buzzflash.com/anderson/05/06/and05017.html>
6. "BushGore." Billionaires for Bush (or Gore). Retrieved January 20th, 2007 from <http://www.wanderbody.com/billionairesforbushorgore/materials/>
7. "BushKerry." Retrieved on June 1st, 2006 from <http://www.flickr.com/images/spaceball.gif>
8. The Bubble Project: Retrieved January 25th, 2007 from <http://thebubbleproject.com/index.php>
9. "Obsession" 10. "Joe Chemo" 11. "Marlboro—the New Frontier." Adbusters Spoof Ads. Retrieved October 10th, 2006 from <http://adbusters.org/spoofads/index.php>
- Type I English: 12. "Abuse Plastic Bag" 13. "Sauteed Happy Family" 14. "Danger"
- Type II English: 15. "Grammar Crisis Room" 16. "Be Graceful-Be Civil"
- Type II English Shirts for Sale. Retrieved June 2006 from <http://www.english.com/>

Culture Jamming Defined

"Culture jamming is the act of transforming existing mass media to produce negative commentary about itself, using the original medium's communication method. It is a form of public activism which is generally in opposition to commercialism, and the vectors of corporate image. The aim of culture jamming is to create a contrast between corporate image and the realities of the corporation.... It is based on the idea that advertising is little more than propaganda for established interests, and that there is a lack of an available means for alternative expression in industrialized nations. Culture jamming is a resistance movement to the perceived hegemony of popular culture." (Wikipedia Encyclopedia)

From Input to Affordance (van Lier, 2006): A Challenge for Critical Multiliteracies?

- "Input comes from a view of language as a fixed code and of learning as a process of receiving and processing pieces of this fixed code" (i.e. telementation, the conduit metaphor; learning as computation) (p. 90).
- "The notion of affordance is related to *meaning potential* [cf. Halliday], so long as we do not define meaning as sitting inside words and sentences (or in objects). More accurately, it is *action potential*, and it emerges as we interact with the physical and social world" (p. 92).

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