Privatizing Creativity

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Privatizing Creativity

Thanks, ---- I’m Catherine Tebaldi from UM Amherst, very pleased to share observations from my pilot research in Paris. Taking as a starting point ads I saw in cafes and food trucks, I will examine how advertising and popular media participates in, and profits from, the construction of a Mock urban language.

I explore the constructions of a mock urban French that sounds hip at first but echoes colonial advertisements that positions subjects as not fully literate. Oasis juice’s anthropomorphized Verlan-speaking fruit, “Onsfan la Poire”, recalls the mock pidgin of the older ad slogan “y a bon ...Banania”. In the language of these ads images ranging from savage illiteracy to dopey gang members” are ascribed to what Inoue termed the “ventriloquized bodies” (2003) of students of color in France’s urban peripheries.

Mock Urban French
Verlan, the syllable inversion game, came stand for “banlieue language”, or “urban French”. series of speech practices that range from the use of inversion, slang, interlanguaging and codeswitching, palatalization and rhythm shifts. Previous images of urban French were seen by scholars like , Godailler as community and identity building “crypto-ludic" play, “verbal acrobatics” or, instances of subversive linguistic creativity that challenged exclusion and essentialist identities with Hip hop hybridities.

Now it is a way in which middle aged advertisers try to look cool. Advertising, Dubbed Movies, and French textbooks contribute to the reification of urban language, caricaturing identities and privatizing creativity.

Indexical Chains
Borrowed urban language builds a very different series of identities. As Jane Hill notes in her work on mock Spanish, mock language serves to give the user a casual cosmopolitan air, (maybe in France Bohemian Bourgeois Chic), while it indirectly communicates negative stereotypes of the community depicted. In her 2005 paper, she notes that intertextuality as source and evidence for indirect indexical meanings. That is indirect negative indexicality is confirmed by the consistency of these references, intertextual chains. Fake hip-hop juice ads follow colonial hot chocolate ones –not to mention the oversexualized zebras of the Orangina campaign . They index a consistent series of images of urban language, from savage illiterates, to comical delinquents, to bilingual terrorists.

Selling Savage Illiteracy
The image above depicts the a cartoonish tirailleur senegalais, the front line soliders in the French colonial army, drinking banana hot chocolate. the fake pidgin tagline below him reads “y a bon”. This colonialist tagline is now illegal, but can still be seen. In a 2011 article anti racist group MRAP stated that lines like this are teaching young French people from their first baby bottle that black people are caricatures, incapable of speaking anything other than a simplified French.

Although this ad clearly doesn’t reflect black voices, it does reflect historical practices of language teaching. In his recent book “Race and War in France: Colonial Subjects in the French Army” Historian Richard Fogarty describes how Senegalese soldiers were taught a simplified pidgin French that corresponded to, and enforced, colonial imaginings of their intellectual inferiority. This language permitted their inclusion in the army, but enforced their social exclusion. Fogarty notes this was part of an explicit policing of color lines, as colonial subjects began to move in the metropole, fake pidgin prevented them from being taken seriously as speaking subjects.

Imagined pidgins

New descriptions of urban language these reflect old colonial cultural stereotypes, or what Flores and Rosa (2015) describe as raciolinguistic ideologies. Despite being written 496,000 times, at last google count, urban French is described as an oral language, “without grammar”, and urban speakers are often depicted as less than fully literate – as this cartoon, where a suited man rebukes a hoodie wearing youth that even when speaking he make spelling errors – suggests.

Comical Delinquents

Following Hill’s (2005) work on indexical chains and Mock language in internet searches, I conducted some preliminary searches on Verlan. I examined the top google results for this keyword, noting the most frequent descriptors and the most frequently occurring verlan vocabulary. I then repeated the process for the top vocabulary words. Together a consistent series of images emerged:-delinquency (verbal art described as cunning), further expressed in a lack of school motivation (laziness, “authentic” verlan words themselves described as hanging about the corridors and not going to class) and a desire to party, with accompanying vulgarity about women. Hill describes these as a way of approximating the exposure of a speaker, and they did accord with observations from my fieldwork, such as joking newspaper headlines about “kiffing the keufs” or liking the cops, or when a middle class professor I meet said he use verlan only to ask if you “pecho”, or picked up a woman.

Ventriloquized bodies

Inoue’s Speech Without a Speaking Subject (2003) discusses the role of translation and dubbing in linguistically constructing raced, gendered, and classed identities. The social images of language are constructed in reference to global ideals – in this case often images from American media. As in her study on Japanese women’s language, constructed with translations
from Gone with the Wind, many of the most typical Urban Language came from movies about American Hip hop. In films like How High African American characters are dubbed in a French heavy in Verlan and slang words, especially when they are shown as hilariously academically inept and disinterested. Not only teaching viewers 19 new ways to say drunk, high, and party, imagined urban language was used to show difference and highlight borders, as when the urbanstoners of how high talk to white Harvard intellectuals.

Academic disinterest

Most striking was the link between this youth language and images of academic failure, as we can see in this cartoon, which mocks a young boy, shown living in housing projects, and his academic abilities saying that he would be able to skip a grade if the textbooks were in Verlan: This is only funny (ok, its actually not funny) if you presume that he is already seriously behind in school. An article on Verlan for French Wikipedia presented 11 words for getting high, and not one for school. Within the top three results for each of the most common words was something mocking academics, most often the sentence that defined the word, as in “this exam is so boring” c’est trop relou, cet exam”.

Paradoxically, this language of academic disinterest sells a great deal of French lessons. Within these often “advanced” french lessons for Anglophone students, urban speakers were portrayed as not very smart and as failed bilinguals in songs, films, and articles. Selling urban language (Verlan as authentic street language, “not classroom french”) meant confirming many previous stereotypes connecting creativity to delinquency and disinterest.

Political Consequences

Mock language has political consequences. Back to, Nadine Morano, the former minister of Solidarity who in one breath equated Islam and Verlan, and sagging pants and social failure. backwards language, back wards culture, backwards hats. Mock language became a real issue, verlan a shorthand for difference. she shamed creativity to blame kids for their own social exclusion. Easier than paying for enough teachers in St. Denis since Verlan was taken up by advertising one way in which young people expressed difference and dissent was throught language mixing.Yet after the attacks, bilingualism and even spelling mistakes were cause for terrorist alert. Alain Finkelkraut, a member of the academie Francaise and Gilles Kepel, a “media intellectual” and author of “terror in the hexagon”, describe urban French as “the language of the enemy” in a Finkelraut’s radio show “repliques”.

Small grammatical infelicities in the attacker’s manifesto, primarily apparent in the written text, of were, for Kepel, a sign that ALL young Muslims see Arabic as the only true language for thinking the world. What might have been seen as typos in another, more Catholic, context, were signs of young Muslims desire to Arabicize and barbarize French. Now we definitely don’t have to get them bilingual arabic classes.
Subverting Advertising

If advertising appropriates language play, kids are also playing with the language of advertising. Despite advertisers, hipsters and Solidarity ministers, young people still find ways to creatively and transgressively play with language. These include hashtags like #si les noirs parlaient comme des blancs, or if black people talked like white people, which call out the language of everyday racism. They also use the language of advertising to contest both linguistic policing, as in this ad that uses a picture of cornflakes to mock the prescriptivist hashtag #je suis circonflexe, and capitalism, as in the graffiti I saw during a recent student strike: Using the Nike Swoosh, with a french accent, they say “nike ta banque” (screw your bank)

When they assert nique ta banque. Young people adapt not only the languages of their parents, but use linguistic creativity to challenge the processes by which it is privatized, to assert they don’t buy the images of themselves as savage illiterates, comical delinquents, nor bilingual terrorists.