

These Lions Speak Zulu Too: Exoticising African Languages

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If the fact that there are only 27 of us in the entire world is not impressive enough, we also speak Zulu.

(from a 1995 subway poster depicting the white lions at the Metro Toronto Zoo)

Initially, when I read the above quote, a number of questions went through my mind and, despite my many attempts to see the humour intended by such an ad, I was overcome with anger, humiliation, and frustration. As a South African Zulu speaker living in Canada, the image of Africa that faced me then had neither humour nor the exotic sense it was meant to have. The presentation of Africa in Canadian media has more often taken two diametric persuasions. On the one hand, there is the image of starving children, poverty, and war. On the other hand, there is the picture of Africa as an endless land of wonders, of exotic people, and amiable animals who can even speak exotic languages. Certainly, the ad under discussion falls within the latter trend; that is, the white lions are worth seeing because they are exotic. There are only 27 of them and they can talk, not just any language, but the exotic Zulu.

As a Zulu speaker, I do not find anything exotic in the knowledge and use of the Zulu language. To me, this language is like any other language that groups of people use to communicate with each other. In fact, I would have found these lions really exotic had they been portrayed as literate in English (which is also one of South Africa's national languages) for this would have meant that upon arrival these lions did not need any ESL lessons. At the same time we need to remember that English, unlike Zulu, has been historically viewed not as a language of animals, but as a language of a superior group of people with tremendous power to name and direct the ; course of actions of other groups.

To me, this subway ad was one that brought back other images in which the African continent and its people are presented as similar to wild animals, as people living in the prehistoric era with forests as homes. For me, this ad reinforced the notion that Zulu people inhabit the forest and are therefore able to communicate and commune with animals in Zulu, which in turn explained the lions' linguistic knowledge. My reading of this ad is not just unique to me as a Zulu speaker living in Canada, but is a historical portrayal of images of the subordinated groups by the powerful, who, because of their positions of power, continue to draw images of the "other" in western societies. It would be absurd of me to suggest or even hint at the fact that producers of such an ad are oblivious to the multiple meanings and readings inherent in it. I would rather argue that

such advertisements are an affirmation of the discourse of the "west and the rest" (Hall & Gieben, 1992). That is, such ads are not just ad hoc productions, but rather, they fit into the historical processes through which the concept of the "west" was made possible and which, once produced, became productive in its existence.

Among other things, Hall & Gieben (1992) state that the "west", as a historical and not a geographical construct, functions by acting as a criterion for evaluating other societies and by providing a standard of comparison between societies. The "west" also provides a composite picture of what different societies and cultures are like by functioning as part of a language, a system of representation. Hall argues that since Europe was produced in part through contact and comparison with other non-western societies, the difference between these societies became the standard against which the west measured its achievements. This in turn led to the development of western colonial discourses that speak for and represent other non-western cultures. The "west" became associated with concepts such as urban and developed; and the "rest" with concepts such as non-western, rural and underdeveloped. It not surprising that a number of my White Anglo Saxon friends, when asked if they knew what country Zulu speakers are found in, responded: "some African country, I don't know - maybe East Africa I think around Kenya," and when asked to explain their choice, one friend responded "but lions and all those wild animals live in jungles", implying that jungles are only in Africa.

This comment, then, needs to be analysed and understood within Hall's framework of the creation of western societies and their "others." The processes by which the "west" represented difference were in turn implicated in power relations. Unable to recognise and respect difference, the "west" treated and represented other cultures as different and inferior. The "west's" representation of different cultures led to the development of stereotypes; stereotype defined to mean a process in which several characteristics of a society are collapsed into a generalisation which comes to represent the essence of the society. For Hall, the stereotype is dual in nature with good and bad sides all consumed and represented through the concept of the "west." The world is divided symbolically into good-bad, us-them and so on. Through this process of symbolic differentiation, the "rest" gets defined as everything that the "west" is not. But Hall argues that even the "rest," the "other," is split into two camps, friendly-hostile, innocent-vicious. Again, it is with such an understanding that we need to examine the representation of the white lions at the Metro Toronto Zoo. It is such a framework that accounts for the way the "west" represents its "others." For instance, Africa is a land of the "savage" Zulu speakers who can tame their "savage" lions, while this "savageness" has an element of nobility which can be used and represented in western societies. In what follows, I briefly outline the

processes in which power relations between symbolic forms of representation such as language are established in order to illustrate how representations of the west and its cultures are highly dependent on the subordination of cultures of difference. I also argue that advertisers must be aware of multiple readings of any form of representation and be able to take , responsibility for their representational choices.

Language, communication, and meaning

Communication has traditionally been seen as a process involving the encoding of ideas in the mind of a speaker or writer, transmitting the ideas through some medium (speech or writing) and subsequently decoding the information in the mind of the listener or reader. This communication theory has been around and effective for a number of centuries. It has, however, been criticised as an inaccurate model of how human communication actually operates. This model incorporates two illusions: the idea that communication consists of transferring ideas from one mind to another and the idea that words and sentences have Stable and fixed meanings.

According to the fixed code theory of communication, the meaning of a word can be decoded by the application of a set of linguistic rules which make up the individual speaker's or reader's knowledge of language. Words and sentences can of course be ambiguous, but such ambiguities can be marked as possibilities during the process of decoding. Further, if a reader arrives at a different meaning from that of the writer, then this is a result of some distortion on the part of the reader, or a result of the writer and reader using different algorithms of encoding and decoding meaning; that is, they speak different languages. According to this view, words may change meaning over a period of time, but at any moment in linguistic history, the current ' meaning can be specified.

Contemporary poststructuralist theorists have criticised the above theory by suggesting, at their most extreme, that meaning is not fixed by language but is entirely dependent on context. The American sociolinguist Deborah Cameron, for example, supports this argument by citing the Soviet linguist Volosinov, and also the French deconstructionist, Julia Kristeva:

Both these writers point out that all meaning is in the end contextual, and it is impossible in principle to determine once and for all the meaning of any expression.

Determinancy either of form or of meaning is a myth, shored up by the pointless abstractions of structural linguistic. (Cameron, 1989, p.15)

Volosinov's theory of communication and meaning also has challenged the fixed code theory by arguing that "language acquires life and historically evolves precisely here, in

concrete verbal communication, and not in the abstract linguistic system of language forms, nor in the individual psyche of speakers" (Volosinov, 1973, p.95). Volosinov went further, however, and argued that it is difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish between those aspects of a word's meaning which draw from the content of utterances, and those that a linguist might traditionally call the literal meaning.

Volosinov's idea parallels recent debates over the definition of word meanings. To take just one example from Cameron (1992), how much of our knowledge of what a dog is like can legitimately be said to form part of the term "dog"? Umberto Eco (1984) argues that each word has a range of potential associations which will vary for each speaker depending on their previous experiences. At any given time, when the word is encountered in context, some of these associations will be "blown up" and some others remain untapped, or as Eco puts it, "narcosized."

Poststructuralist theories take Eco's point further and point out that the notion of context is related to the social and political relations in which speakers find themselves, as well as to the linguistic context created by neighbouring words. Feminist poststructuralist theorists demonstrate this notion of context through an analysis of how particular meanings are derived from, for example, different gender relations. The different meanings of the word "girl," for instance, are dependent on whether it was used by a woman of equal status or by someone (male or female) of higher rank. In such a case, the power relations between speaker and listener need to be analysed before the meaning of "girl" can be understood. But even within such social limitations, individuals are able to negotiate their own social identity by adopting a certain style of speaking that possesses a particular social meaning.

The idea that social context is an important aspect of meaning is a simple but crucial one, embedded with far reaching implications. It suggests, for example, that speech styles, forms of writing, and other kinds of linguistic utterances do not have absolute meanings that transcend their context of use, but must be understood by reference to particular ideologies and power relations. Such a contextual view of meaning leads to a different understanding of language, which is concerned not so much with the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign, the Saussurean view of language system, but rather with particular utterances and texts set in social context. Theories of how social contexts are structured become the basic component of any theory of meaning. These theories, then, suggest that while we engage in the process of decoding text, whether spoken or written, the listener or reader creates the meanings. The meanings do not reside in the language alone, but they partake of the personal and unique experiences of listeners and readers. Meanings are induced depending on the experience and verbal competence of the person who is

listening and/or reading.

This poststructuralist framework renders itself relevant and desirable for analysing and understanding the subway quotation mentioned at the beginning of this text. In what context then are we to understand this quotation and the symbol that accompanied it? I suggest that such representations of difference need to be understood within the historic construction and operation of the "west" and its "others." Wild animals such as lions were historically presented as attesting to the undeveloped nature of African (the "other") societies, which got interpreted to mean backward. But that which is backward and savage can be tamed and civilised by western societies, therefore affirming the developed nature of the "west." Furthermore, that which is savage and wild can be caged, trapped, imprisoned, and brought to the western world to be put on display; a circus of show and tell. As I shall now outline, within such symbolic representations are implications of power relations.

Language and symbolic domination

The situatedness of communication of all kinds is commonplace for sociolinguistic studies and studies of women's values and beliefs. Both investigate, for instance, the issue of how gender is embedded in relations of power. Power is defined by Bourdieu (1982) as symbolic domination (meaning domination by means of symbols, as opposed to "real" domination). This situatedness of communication, however, is not always obvious to students of popular culture, let alone to those who produce and distribute cultural resources such as the advertising copy quoted at the beginning of this text.

In sociolinguistics, symbolic domination occurs when those who do not control the authoritative forms consider them more credible or persuasive, more deserving of use than the forms they control. As a result, people denigrate the very forms they know and identify with. Examples from linguistic studies include standard languages versus minority languages or racial/ethnic vernaculars and ritual speech versus everyday talk. But sociolinguistic studies further argue that these respected, authoritative linguistic practices are not just forms; they deliver characteristic cultural definitions of social life. Gal (1989) argues that when these definitions are embodied in, for example, divisions of labour and in social institutions such as schools and court rooms, they serve the interests of some groups better than others. Bourdieu (1977) also argues that it is through dominant linguistic practices such as standard languages that speakers within state supported institutions such as schools impose on others their group's definition of events, people, and actions. These imposed definitions eventually become legitimised and normalised. This ability to make others accept and enact one's representation of the world

is a very powerful aspect of symbolic domination. Domination and hegemony are matters of expressive form as well as of cultural content.

Returning then to the ad opening this discussion, we must note that the portrayal of Zulu as a language of animals is not by any means an oversight on the part of the Metro Toronto Zoo, but is a reproduction of what has been established as the norm in western forms of symbolic linguistic representation. This western representational practice of the African "other," and its association with the jungle, the primitive and the exotic, is a historical construct which has been integral to the production of the "west" as developed and urban. Western representations of African societies are implicated in relations of power and actuated in systems of representation. It is this dominant system of representation which looms large in western societies, including Canada, which maintains the image of the "west" as progressive, developed, and so on. Without its "others," and without a continued reference to them, Canada can no longer exist as a western concept. Such subway images then are a reminder of what things were, are, and continue to be.

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