Social semiotics of style: Unsettling oral, written & visual discourse

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Style is used to design and display individual and collective personae and stances often with respect to particular social, cultural and economic orders. Through continuous stylistic practices and moves, we tell others about our perceived and desired position within that order, while at the same time making conclusions about the position of others (Eckert 2016: 76). Hence, style is both individual and collective. It is a processual endeavor that contributes to the stratified makeup of the social world and to the (un)planned trajectories of individual/particular subjectivities and bodies.

Even though, analytically and metadiscursively, we often talk about styles of speech, writing, movement and clothing as separate entities, in social interaction style is always operating as "a multimodal and multidimensional cluster of linguistic and other semiotic practices" (Bucholtz 2009: 2). The simultaneous operation of multiple communicative modes in the production of style makes it particularly relevant to develop a social semiotic approach to the working and effects of style in contemporary society. This panel brings together scholars who look at unsettling uses of style in different geographic, social and cultural settings with the aim of disentangling the multimodal and multidimensional character and the ideological underpinnings of style.

The conceptualization of style as social practice further entails looking into different forms of the performance of style, that is, processes of styling and stylization (Bakhtin 1981; Coupland 2007). This can range from individual style, social style, lifestyle to even, advertising style (van Leeuwen 2005). While styling can be understood as "the routine enactment and reshaping of styles in social interaction", something we often do without thinking, stylization refers to the "knowing" and strategic deployment of style for particular communicative goals (Mortensen, Coupland & Thøgersen 2017: 10). This makes it relevant to consider the role of style/styling/stylization in sociolinguistic change.

Since styles can be used to both align with and challenge persisting social norms, the study of style is intimately linked to questions of normativity and creativity, and structure and agency. Many styles emerge out of resistance to existing structures of normativity, e.g. punk and DIY aesthetics (Triggs 2006). Such styles often get mainstreamed and appropriated by elite and commercial interests with both intended and unintended consequences. For example, the fashion industry lives to a large extent by such procedures of taming and commodifying creativity and dissent (Zukin 2004; Barthes 2005).

A social semiotic study of style necessarily includes examining the technological, mediational and political economic structures, resources and processes that regulate what is recognized as a style – by whom and for what purposes – and how it becomes linked and unlinked to particular social identities, personae, places, and linguistic features/semiotic resources. Contributors to this panel share this concern in accounting for this unsettling (of) style and they do so by drawing on and analysing data from a variety of spaces and places. The integration of approaches from social semiotics, sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology extends the conceptualisation of style as constituting linguistic ideologies of distinctiveness (Irvine 2001) to include the idea that the unsettling of style/styling/stylisations unsettles dynamics of fluidity and fixity in given spaces and places.

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1. Doing it with style: Negotiating language, body and belonging

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Sounding local, while not looking local tends to confuse people – or as the South African comedian Trevor Noah puts it, "if the person who doesn't look like you speaks like you, your brain short-circuits" (Noah, 2016: 58). Particular bodies are expected to speak in particular ways, and any violation of such ideological expectations may cause surprise, amusement, sympathy, solidarity, uncertainty, rejection or even anger. As noted by Bucholtz & Hall (2016: 173) "bodies and embodiment are central to the production, perception, and social interpretation of language." Still in many sociolinguistic studies the body is often neglected.

In my presentation I draw on results from three studies (recent and ongoing) where issues of language, place and belonging are thematised. Central questions are: Who are seen as entitled and legitimate users of different features or lects? What combinations of styles are granted or rejected? The first study is an analysis of a rap video and YouTube commentary (n=661) where unexpected combinations of linguistic and cultural styles, attributes and activities are put on display (Røyneland 2018). The second is a visual-verbal-guise experiment where the respondents (n=341) where asked to evaluate a number of speech samples of rural and urban lects, each combined once with a traditionally North-European-looking face and once with traditionally South-Asian-looking face (Røyneland & Jensen forthc.). The third study is an online survey of young people's language practice online (n=1026), where I explore what kinds of social and semiotic work multilingual and multilectal practices accomplish in online discourse. These studies bring into view how style may be exploited to disrupt expectations and settled norms, creating space for new combinations of identity and belonging.

Keywords: embodiment, style, dialect, visual-verbal guise, online discourse

2. T.H.U.G Parody and the unsettled stylizations of woman2woman

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Youth multilingualism studies have highlight to date the unique, creative and dynamic stylizations of performance, voice and genre (Williams, 2016). Attention in this regard has been given to the intetextual intermixing of racialized speech forms that lead to new forms of speech (Williams 2017), the unsettling of language and the fixity of language to space and place (Bauman and Briggs, 1990, 2003). Following on from this, I propose an emancipatory perspective on stylization based on the search for new relationalities and reinventions (following Roux and Williams, in press). To illustrate this route, I draw on a youth multilingualism project, particularly online fieldwork data, of the pop group Woman2Woman. I pay particular attention to their parodic performance of Beyonce Knowles and other artist songs published on YouTube, and point out how their parody unsettle hegemonic music listening ears, and genre authentic loyalists and critics (by focusing on reaction videos uploaded on YouTube). I analyze discourses of cisheteropatriarchy, and take a critical stance against language hegemony by participants in the reaction videos and commentaries. I conclude with a number of suggestions for expanding an unsettled approach to stylization in youth multilingualism.

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Williams, Q.E. 2017. Remix Multilingualism: Ethnography, Hip Hop and the Performance of Marginalized Voice.

3. Unsettling Japanese: The social semiotics of language play from a translanguaging perspective

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Modern-day social interaction involves dynamic use of multilingual and multimodal resources. In Japanese communication, such interaction is often characterized by the creative mixing of registers and languages in a highly monolingual environment. Today, non-Japanese languages are being incorporated into everyday contexts in surprising, non-traditional ways. Some praise such innovative ways of expression while others are overwhelmed by their unsettling nature. For those who are in good command of English, such unsettling language use appears jeering, and they became derided as Engrish among non-Japanese speakers.

In this presentation, we explore such data with a translanguaging approach. This approach helps us vindicate our unsettling Japanese data which are often deemed frivolous. Examples will explain how translanguaging works in both everyday and aesthetic settings in Japanese, e.g., what new social meanings do the unsettling stylization of Engrish(-like) texts add in the given context? Our interest is unveiling semiotic processes of the translanguaging stylization. Special attention will be paid to mediated discourses and their intertextual practices seen in language play, specifically those offering insights into the dynamics at the interface of the temporal and spatial dimensions of human social interaction.

In particular, we will discuss the theoretical implications of deploying translanguaging as a perspective to uncover semiotic processes of language play within predominantly monolingual Japanese contexts. We will show that, as it is common for contemporary texts intended for (a largely) monolingual Japanese audience to be infused with foreign language elements, concepts such as creativity and criticality are highly salient. This presentation aims to show the added value of translanguaging as a framework for understanding Japanese social interaction as evidence of the possibility of linguistic and cultural integration within a monolingual regime.

Keywords: Japanese, social semiotics, language play, translanguaging, stylization

4. Styling the rural: The phonological construction of the countryside in southern England

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In 2011, Michael Woods argued that "'rurality is … a social construct … an imagined entity that is brought into being by particular discourses of rurality that are produced, reproduced and contested by academics, the media, policy-makers, rural lobby groups and ordinary individuals" (2011:9). In this paper, I show how, through a circuit of the emergence, circulation and reproduction of ideological discourses, Southern English rurality is partially constructed and reproduced through the strategic deployment in both old and new media of rhoticity, the realisation of non-prevocalic /r/ in words such as 'farm'.

Rhoticity is an obsolescing phonological characteristic of the English rural South-West and, today is more robustly preserved in larger urban areas, such as Bristol. In other areas of the rural South of England, such as East Anglia, it died out well over a century ago. Despite its obsolescence, however, comedians, film-makers, and dramatists still recruit rhoticity to phonologically stylize the peripheral 'South-West'. Characters that we are urged to read as from this area, especially old ones in pastoral occupations lacking significant formal education, are routinely portrayed with rhotic accents.

The ideological circuit has led to the association of rhoticity as being iconically rural. Rhoticity has, therefore, been deployed to style *any* such older, less educated rural character, whether or not their character comes from a rhotic part of England. Examples from TV drama, comedy, film, and the internet will be used to demonstrate how a recessive consonant is put to work to construct and disseminate ideologies of the countryside. Such constructions of rurality as these, broadcast regularly into people's living rooms, strongly shape how people 'see', and, 'hear', the countryside, despite contestations from academics and from those in the rural South itself.

Woods, M. (2011). Rural. London: Routledge.

Keywords: language ideology, rhoticity, rural, England, mediatization

5. Namaste: Investigating the stylization of bikram yoga as a contemporary global practice

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The last decades have seen an increase in the popularity, trends, practices and styles of yoga worldwide (Rosenblatt 2013; Sarbacker 2014). From metropolitan cities to rural villages, different kinds of yoga classes and techniques are offered which have created niche markets targeting primarily white middle and upper class individuals. In this paper, I investigate the performance of a specific style of yoga, namely, bikram, (a form of hot yoga) by examining the various structures, resources and processes that co-construct and maintain it as a certain modern and global practice (albeit with its roots in India) that has become mainstreamed and appropriated by elite and commercial interests (Zukin 2004; Barthes 2005). A social semiotic approach is taken to illustrate how both linguistic and visual elements work in tandem in the stylization of this social and embodied practice as a way to enhance the mind-body connection through postures and moving meditation while at the same time presenting it as a particular way of life for many of its followers regardless of age, race, gender or class. As such, I look into how the performance of bikram is stylized and performed, circulated, and sold that encompasses analyses of individual style, social style, lifestyle and advertising style (van Leeuwen 2005) within different online and offline settings with the aim of disentangling the multimodal and multidimensional character and the ideological underpinnings of this style and form of yoga practice. The data for this study come from: a) ethnographic observations and participation of yoga classes in an Oslo studio that has taken place over a 2- year period b) 30 open-ended interviews conducted with instructors and students, c) cultural artifacts of one yoga studio, and d) digital ethnography of online resources.

6. Semotics of hair stylisations: Disrupting class and race through hair talk

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The aim of this paper is to examine semiotic performance and online commentary of one of the most individual stylisations, hair. Hairstyles are semiotically mediated as something to be feared and regulated and discourses about hair are stratified along hierarchies of class and race. Historically, the white-gaze distorts, caricatures and dehumanies those that fall outside the in-group ideas of taste, with hair, like many other aesthetic properties carrying a symbolic value.

This paper invovles a visual and content analysis of two Twitter campaigns associated with talk about hair in Ireland, #dublinhun and #donttouchmyhair. In both of these case studies I examine how practices of vernacular styisation and hair style in the domain of Twitter function to disrupt ideologies of class and race. In examining #dublinhun I focus on how indivudal hair stylisations are brought in to humorous dialogic interaction with vernacular features of Dublin 'chavspeak' (Vaughan and Moriarty, 2018). Here, humourous microagressions play out as class based indexical linking in urban 21st Century Ireland, where one particular hairstyle, the bun, serves to enregister the #dublinhun caricature. In the case of #dontouchmyhair I examine how mixed race Irish individuals use images and talk about their hairstyle to negotiate their place in Irish society. In so doing they contest racial and linguistic power regimes and make aclaim for an authentic identity.

In capturing, the orders that configure, sustain and disrupt a white middle class gaze that subject individuals to regimes invisibility and hypervisibility, these vignettes contribute to wider discussions on class and race in contemporary sociolinguistics

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Keywords: semiotic stylisation, ideologies, class, race, hair

7. City fonts: Typographic and entrepreneurial stylization and branding of urban space/places

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London, Milano, Stockholm. Names of cities, and names of city fonts, i.e. typefaces designed exclusively for a particular city to give visual shape to its urban landscape and brand the city. As a subtle but increasingly more common form of "typographic landscaping" (Järlehed & Jaworski 2015), city fonts contribute to the ongoing semiotization and commodification of both urban spaces and writing. This paper examines city fonts as part of urban entrepreneurial stylization, where stylization refers to the "knowing" and strategic deployment of style for particular communicative goals (Mortensen, Coupland & Thøgersen 2017). Studies of "urban entrepreneurialism" (Harvey 1989) show how the perceived growing competition between cities for economic growth forces them to continuously create new public images. They further stress its speculative character and point out how economic concerns are put before social ones. The city fonts discussed in this paper are part of this new entrepreneurial image and contribute in a tangible way to the "new writing" (van Leeuwen 2008) of the "new" city. Ideally, city, writing and image become one.

This presentation contributes to the social semiotic study of style in three ways. Typographic stylization of urban space not only (1) unsettles the boundary between writing and image, but also (2) that between writing-image and space. Moreover, (3) the examination of city fonts draws attention to one of the most pervasive and unsettling discourses of our times, the one of urban entrepreneurialism. However, a detailed examination of the personal, economic and political reasons behind the production of four different city fonts (TilbergsAns, Dubai Font, Alfabeto Bilbao, Stockholm Type) reveals how creativity and normativity, agency and structure interact in different ways in different cities.

Keywords: city fonts, typography, stylization, city branding, urban entrepreneurialism

Discussant:

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