

Language as popular deictic: Reading “Not Happy Jan!” as the evidence of shifting cultural contexts

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ABSTRACT: Students of 21st century English need a range of literacy practices to interact with and construct meanings from the texts of our culture. Contemporary studies of literary texts encourage exploration of the concept of intertextuality, seeing texts as social events within a cultural context, their meanings understood against a background of other texts of similar kinds. The paper discusses a form of critical discourse analysis that makes possible critical readings of texts of popular culture as contextualised within a particular community. The discussion examines a social dimension of language use where current cultural artefacts such as advertisements, television shows and popular personalities become the reference point for new linguistic expressions such as, Not Happy Jan! These sayings may then become part of everyday communication in conversation, emails and chat rooms; however, their semiotic value is heavily weighted both by their continuing relevance and popularity. In this way they stand as examples of language as cultural deictic. A sociocultural perspective on linguistic analysis has been adopted to investigate the construction of linguistic ways of belonging in a specific cultural context. It is what Fairclough names, “a systematic way of relating changing discourse practices to wider processes of social and cultural change” (Fairclough, 1992, cited in Cope and Kalantzis, 2000, p. 174).

KEYWORDS: Intertextuality, social semiotics, critical discourse analysis, cultural deictic, cultural practice.

INTRODUCTION

This paper investigates specific examples of language choices in communicative practice to create particular texts. These texts deploy the meaning making resources of our community of Sydney, 2003. It is a specific cultural context, therefore, the meaning potential constructed is made possible only by reference to shared contexts the access to which are strictly limited by degrees of social contact and time. Through a linguistic examination of a variety of texts taken from popular communication media a connection is made between discourse (as stretch of communicative text) and Discourse (as cultural values/ beliefs / assumptions) that recognises the social dimension of language use (Lemke, 1995). It is proposed that what we say, what we do, and the sense we, and others, make of our words and deeds marks us as members of a community. Therefore, an analysis of specific examples of language can be used to signal not only sociocultural contexts but also sociocultural change (Fairclough, 1992; Foucault, 1985). Language is viewed as a “dynamic representational resource” (Cope and Kalantzis, 2000, p. 5) that is adapted to suit the user’s specific needs.

Recent Australian television advertisements and broadcasts have furnished examples that demonstrate how language acts as a deictic in shifting cultural contexts. The examples are unusual texts that become “marked” in the same sense as a marked Theme (an unexpected start to a sentence) is marked in grammar when their use is a deliberate disjunction of what is expected. For example, the sentence that starts familiar fairy tales, *once upon a time there lived a dragon*, deliberately focuses the reader’s attention first on the time instead of the on the action or the participants of the narrative. The use of Theme in this way constructs the information to be presented in a specific way for a chosen effect, that is, for emphasis. The linguistic choice to use a marked Theme acts to break the existing semantic chaining or the progression of meaning making achieved thus far.

The contexts in which the examples below occur have not constrained the act of meaning making to a predictable utterance. In the case of the examples discussed here, the speaker has chosen to import an item that carries significant cultural capital from a different context as a signifier, an anaphoric reference to another context. The only possible means of successful communication is if the listener knows the intertextual reference and can complete the exchange by making a link that depends on shared understandings. This approach to texts is a kind of critical discourse analysis conceptualized as the mapping on to one another of “three different sorts of analysis: linguistic (semiotic) analysis of text, intertextual analysis of text, and sociocultural analysis of discursive event” (Fairclough, 1992, cited in Cope and Kalantzis, 2001, p. 175.)

Figure 1 below illustrates an example of intertextual reference used in a computer classroom. The teacher instructed the adult students to *follow the breadcrumbs*. When several students looked with puzzlement at their screens, the teacher realized there had been a failure of communication. Not all students shared his understanding of the expression. The original literary reference is back to the story of Hansel and Gretel. When the children were taken into the woods the second time, Hansel left a trail of breadcrumbs to assist them to find their way home when they were lost. The context of the usage, however, was not in a literacy session but in a computer classroom and so many of the adult students were not able to quickly make the connection between fable and cable. The teacher was instructing the students how to trace their way back along the way that they had come, using the technical version of “breadcrumbs” that were represented in iconic format on the top of the page. Some of the students did not know the reference and had to have the instruction explained in other terms. Even though the expression has become part of information technology parlance, in this case, for the uninitiated, it was a “failed” instance of communication.

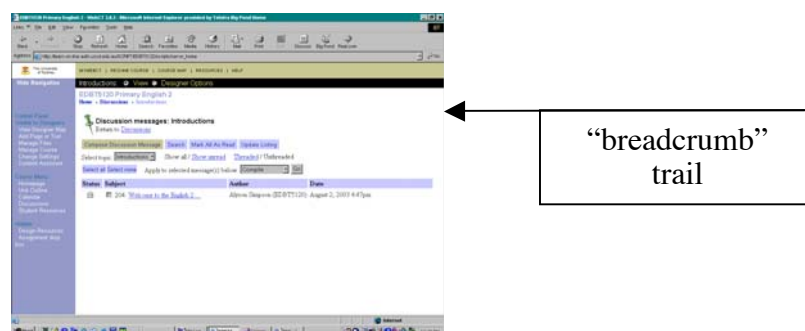


Figure 1. 21st century literacies

The notion of popular deictic discussed here is different from the literary example given above. I suggest that whilst popular deictic expressions are linked to known discourses, these texts are not written but, in the first instance, they are spoken. Not only that but they are spoken within the boundaries of a limited social construction such as a TV show or media creation such as an advertisement which is in a sense ephemeral. For example, the expressions *Look at me!*¹ and *What the!*² depend for their usage to be successful on an intertextual link to their original context and meaning. The context of these expressions exists currently as weekly broadcasts on Australian television networks. However, other examples such as: *doing a Bradbury*³ and *having an Alexander of a day*⁴ are no longer as successful because their reference points are not currently in the media. The theorization of social semiotics suggests that individual social events may be connected with larger patterns of social relationships in a micro/macro model (Lemke, 1995; Threadgold, 1986). This paper identifies some dynamic examples of language use that signal sociocultural change. The TV advertisement described below and the subsequent illustrations given are examples of a popular deictic that has created its own intertextual reference set in our own time.

The Clemenger BBDO advertising agency ran a 30-second advertisement for the Yellow Pages phone book in Australia in 2001. It showed an office manager looking through the phone book for the listing that her assistant, Jan, is meant to have organised. When she discovers it is not there, the manager calls for the assistant. In the meantime, Jan has realised why she has been called and has swiftly left the building. Her boss attempts to open her window to shout at her but is only able to squeeze her face through the opening. Her angry remark is as restricted as her physical freedom. "Not Happy Jan!" she shouts.

To compare the breadcrumbs text with Not Happy Jan at the most basic level, the cultural references for each of the texts are at opposite ends of the written/spoken dichotomy. Written texts such as published fairy tales are highly valued and privileged in our English curriculums and most importantly are fixed in time. There is little fluidity once a particular version of the text has been proofread and published. By contrast, the spoken texts of everyday encounters are free to collect references to current cultural events and then just as free to divest themselves of phrases which have lost their topicality and therefore their currency (using connotations here of both value and time).

It is the "slippery" nature of the spoken which is the main focus of this discussion. For the statement that there are "multiple layers to everyone's identity, there are multiple discourses of identity and multiple discourses of recognition to be negotiated" (Cope and Kalantzis, 2000, p. 17) implies that texts will carry with them traces of the construction of a speaker's identity. Written texts have long been the focus of linguistic analysis and classroom discussion. However, spoken texts are of

¹ Look at me! – Kath and Kim characters from Australian Broadcasting Corporation television series

² What the! – Rove Live on Channel Ten Australian TV

³ Doing a Bradbury – Olympics gold medal winner Steve Bradbury who won by not falling over during an ice skating race.

⁴ Having an Alexander of a day – when Alexander Downer was caretaker Prime Minister of Australia.

great importance also as they can be examined for traces of current identity formation in terms of contemporary culture.

The functional model of language recognises the connection between text and context such that “the texts we construct will differ according to the context in which they are produced” (Derewienka, 1992, p. 73). In most cases this would be an accurate statement. However, the expressions we are discussing are deliberately constructed to be exactly the same in a wide variety of contexts because of the reference they make to knowledge that is “outside” of the immediate context of situation. The expressions are “discordant” when they are used in this way. That is, the sense of fit is not correct because of the distance between the context of situation and the language choice.

In much oral interaction, meanings are created as collaboration between the speakers. Where speakers are face to face, they can assume a fair amount of shared knowledge because the language used often refers to the immediate physical surroundings. Therefore, there is less need to use “content” words in the text as the referents can usually be seen. When the items are not in sight, the assumption is made that it is the task of the speaker to “fill in the details” for those who can’t see so the text becomes more “lexically dense”. The opposite situation exists when communication takes place at a physical distance. Then, “all reference must be internal to the text itself, no longer to things or actions in the physical surroundings. The text must be self sufficient” (Derewienka, 1992, p. 77).

If it is accepted that language is used to construct common understandings, particular ideas and beliefs, then what is the function of a spoken text that uses ellipsed external referents? Is it speakers making interpersonal moves to see if listeners have the same values, attitudes and beliefs as them? In the case of *please explain*, the expression made famous by racist politician, Pauline Hanson, when faced by the term xenophobia that she did not understand; that would have to be the case. When these words are now spoken in an Australian context with a particular nasal tone they are not being used to ask for information. They are encapsulating an entire social attitude towards bigotry.

If the meaning of an expression is obtuse or incomplete then one questions the function of the text. It is obviously included in a text for some purpose. Else why say it? I suggest that texts such as *please explain* or even *look at me!* signal the use of language to ascertain group membership. That is, the texts are used to test out or build bridges within relationships. These question/commands do not function textually as question/ commands; rather they function as statements that operate as a kind of linguistic semaphore. Their purpose is to signal: I am telling you I belong to the social group of people who: disagree with racist politics / watch a particular TV show / etc. In this way they can be seen as the “trace of discourses” (Brodkey, 1992, p. 303) that reveal the underlying values, assumptions and beliefs of the speakers.

The reason I am naming these texts as deictic is because they serve the function of pointing to particular Discourses. Halliday defines the deictic as a form of orientation by reference to the speaker (Halliday, 1994, p. 181). Hence, the term cultural deictic has been chosen for those expressions because, to understand what I am saying, you need to know what I know. In one sense it is a kind of riddling/word play, in another a serious negotiation of social relationships according to shared Discourses. That is,

in these instances of language use the speaker aligns her/himself with a particular cultural group with its own ideology and values and by implication the listener is invited to join, unless by resistance they reject the offer.

If the sharing of common discourses signals the sharing of common habitus then the function of these texts is to establish links and simultaneously marginalise those who do not belong in the group. So the quick spread of these sayings could be read as an indicator of the constitution of a social group whose cultural context has been challenged/alterd; hence the term, “popular deictic”. These sayings stick out. They point to particular social practices in which we engage as if they are a “natural” part of our world and yet they are actively construing boundaries between those that do and those that do not, (fill in the blank) watch ABC TV, follow the Olympics, or disagree with a particular political party’s views.

It is interesting to note that these disjunctive texts succeed only if large intertextual leaps are made to connect the immediate context of situation with the assumed shared context of culture. Williams' notion of space to play (Williams, 1987) in written texts which affords the reader the chance to act as text participant bringing personal meaning to the reading of a text needs to be rethought in relation to these texts as more like “mind the gap!” This is itself a deliberate deictic where to be text participant the listener needs a cultural specific referent (the London railway system) or else meaning is partial, connotative, not denotative. As Kamler et al state “texts are always enmeshed within a range of social attitudes, values and assumptions” (Kamler, 1994, p. 17).

Viewed as a pattern, a rise in the number of individual events where the text is “traded” will be an indication of social adaptation. The more people use the text, the more value the text gains. Schirato and Yell (2000) ask how does a particular communicative act [text] operate to reproduce or to change social relations, power relations and values? An answer can be shown by examining the use of a particular phrase in Australia coined initially within an advertising campaign for a commercial telephone directory. I would like to discuss the take up of the popular deictic, “Not Happy Jan”.

Since its original airing, the expression *Not Happy Jan!* has been quoted, copied, reused in many and varied circumstances. As Ruth Wajnryb of the SMH remarked in her article *Please explain, Jan*, “unto us a phrase is born” (Wajnryb, 2002, p. 1). Its use was tracked via Internet search to discover what other applications it has served. It has appeared in sports reports e.g. *Now the club has to fight to be in Premier League ...Not Happy Jan!*, economic analysis e.g. *Telstra ADSL customers “not happy ... Jan!”*, political commentary e.g. *She was clearly a “not happy, Jan”, but then her party had just been devastated in WA*, email exchanges e.g. *we lost our game by a fair bit – not happy Jan!*, and even as subtitles for photos of wet cats⁵.

Not pretty enough in this state for the cats corner spot, but amusing all the same, is this picture sent by Norm Kirton from Australia, entitled “Not happy, Jan”.



Figure 2.

In fact the expression has become so well known that it has been adapted for a political slogan, with minor changes, and is still recognised, i.e. “not happy John!” (School campaign for insulation to overcome airplane noise 10/10/02). Each of these instances of semiotic activity demonstrate intertextual reference being made to the words of the ad in a such a way as to suggest that the comment is relevant to the current situation (White, 2003).



Figure 3. Not Happy John

It is through the twin notions of cultural relevance and intertextuality that I wish to examine expressions like *Not Happy Jan!* I can critically frame its use as an instance of the appropriation of a cultural resource (Cope and Kalantzis, 2000, p. 207) which contextualises the speaker. Those who use the expression are carrying out what Gee calls “insider work” (Gee, 1999, p. 14) as only those who recognize the Discourse enacted will construct an “appropriate” meaning from the text. For, as Gee states:

Meaning is not merely a matter of decoding grammar. It is also and more importantly a matter of knowing which of the many inferences that one can draw from an utterance are relevant (Gee, 1999, p. 33).

A LINGUISTIC FRAMING OF POPULAR DEICTIC IN THE CLASSROOM CONTEXT

The K-12 syllabus (Board of Studies), which is the foundation of our teaching of Literacy in Australian schools in the State of NSW, is based on a functional model of language. This model theorizes that all texts are situated within two contexts, that is, a context of culture and a context of situation (Halliday, 1991). Context of situation refers to the grammatical realization of three functions: ideational, interpersonal and textual as field, tenor and mode respectively. That is, the language choices made by the “author” of a text will be based on their knowledge about a certain topic, their relationship with their audience and the suitability of the type of communication

medium e.g. spoken / sign / written / graphic / gestural / spatial or some multimodal combination. The resulting texts are often formed in “patterns or conventions of meaning” (Cope and Kalantzis, 2000, p. 7) that can be recognized as “typical” to a particular context. Context of culture refers to the values, attitudes and beliefs shared by a particular social group. It is vital to note that without admittance to this context of culture, the meaning of a text is unstable. Therefore, in our teaching of grammar in NSW to students K-12, it is considered necessary to make students aware of the influence of context of culture.

We should remind ourselves that knowing the audience for a text is a vital influence on the linguistic choices made within a text. Often in our teaching, too much emphasis is put on using the correct grammar and text structure for an idealized text type with a lack of equal attention given to audience and text purpose. My purpose in this discussion is not to negate the importance of grammar and structure, but rather to re-emphasize a consideration of context of culture in relation to audience and text purpose. As the later examples show, without a link to the context of culture of the audience, appropriate grammar choices set in a well-structured text will be disconnected from meaning. For misunderstandings arise when a slippage occurs where an author makes a selection in realizing any of the linguistic functions in terms which have no reference point from the listener / reader / viewer’s perspective.

Once trained in grammatical awareness, students as young as infants (K-2) are able to decode grammar successfully. They become more aware of the constructedness of texts. What is just as important is to also train them to be critically aware of the Discourses which influence the choices that are made in the construction of a text. To extrapolate this to our deictic text, we can look at an example. In a recent conversation one friend said to another after discussing the problematic reorganisation of a roster of musicians to play for a function, “not happy Jan”. The friend to whom this was addressed recognised the name of the person Jan to be referring to a pianist on the roster and logically questioned, “What’s wrong with her?” When his comment was greeted with laughter the speaker did not understand his “mistake”. In fact, what he had done was to read the inference of the text inappropriately from the point of view of the speaker yet his reading was perfectly appropriate to his personal context, as it was a situated meaning.

If we analyse the expression for context of situation we can see that the field (music rosters and sick musicians), tenor (two partners in a company) and mode (spoken conversation) are all directed at the negotiation of meaning concerning the immediate topic of reference (how to reorganise a roster of performers). If we then consider the context of culture, the relationships are not so clear. What we see in the problem above is that the friends are demonstrating cultural difference. For it is vital to note that the listener who did not successfully “decode” the expression *Not Happy Jan!* did not know the television advertisement and, therefore, could not join in the exchange successfully. His chain of reference broke down, as he did not share the same cultural capital as his colleague. He expected a linguistic choice to continue the semantic chain of reference in which he shared common understandings with his partner. The linguistic move that was made was more sophisticated. Not only did it depend on shared cultural heritage but also it relied on the acceptance of an unexpected grammatical element. The deliberate discordance of the deictic marked a shift in Discourse referents but only one speaker knowingly made the shift.

I suggest that in some ways the expression is being used as a form of grammatical metaphor where grammatical metaphor has been defined as, “a substitution of one grammatical class, or one grammatical structure by another” (Halliday, cited in Unsworth, 2001, pp. 117-118).

Yet these forms do not summarize what has gone before in a chain of reasoning (Unsworth, 2001, p. 119). The meaning they import makes a leap across the logical cohesion of semantic chains present in the spoken text to make reference to another strongly related semantic proposition. The value added bonus is that the ideational meaning carries with it a strong interpersonal signal. That is, if you understand this text, it proves that you and I have social/cultural commonality. In this way the grammatical metaphor is a resource for constructing not specialized knowledge but specialized relationships where the linguistic variations can be related to “groupings of interest and affiliation” (Cope and Kalantzis, 2000, p. 6). Wells argues that writers who reconstrue experience in terms of semantic structures develop the discursive means for higher mental functioning (Wells, cited in Unsworth, 2001, p. 122). I would argue that using this “abstract” spoken mode allows speakers the same opportunity.

CONCLUSION

What the investigation of Not Happy Jan through systemic functional linguistics shows is that, whilst “popular” deictics are examples of cultural practice, they can also serve as useful connections from the student’s own life world to their experiences within the classroom that allow them to examine themselves as constructed literate subjects. Therefore, if we take seriously the need for students to develop a range of literacy practices to interact with and construct meanings from the texts of our culture, then, we will incorporate analytical work with the texts such as Not Happy Jan in our classrooms. In times when student’s literacy experiences are located more and more in multimedia texts as opposed to written texts, there is a need for a critical pedagogy which can address not only the static but also the dynamic texts of our culture. The creation of popular deictic expressions that make reference to television, advertisements and other multimedia modes of meaning demonstrate what Cope and Kalantzis call “culture-as-process” (Cope and Kalantzis, 2000, p. 29). If pedagogy could encourage the investigation of the linguistic construction of shifting cultural contexts, then this would encourage classroom literacy experiences that engage students in interaction with and construction of meanings from the texts of our culture. It would be part of a range of literacy practices that English could offer to students of the 21st century.

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