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LANGUAGE AND IDEOLOGY: 'NATIONALISM' AND RACIAL CODING IN AUSTRALIAN PERSONAL ADVERTISEMENTS

'There is a widespread consensus that language is never neutral and texts are never innocent' (Stubbs 1996.235).

'Ideology invests language in various ways at various levels'
(Fairclough 1995.71).

'All choices are political ...' (Martin in Stubbs, *ibid.*235).

'Language must continuously articulate ideology.'
(Fowler in Weber 1996.90)

These few quotations exemplify the widely accepted view that there is no text without ideology.

It was believed until recently that ideology is encapsulated in the content of the text, i.e. in lexical meanings (as opposed to form). However, words themselves do not have determinate meanings which can be defined in advance of their use. All words are open to new uses and are flexible in their meanings to some extent. These often depend on the environment in which they are used. Other factors, such as presuppositions, implicature, metaphors, and coherence play an important role in the decoding and interpretation of a text.

This paper attempts to show some ideological aspects, namely nationalism and race awareness, to be traced in such small pieces of text as personal advertisements. The texts were excerpted from the following Australian newspapers: THE AGE, which is a respectable paper; THE DAILY TELEGRAPH, a little tabloidy, and THE WEEKLY SOUTHERN COURIER, which is almost entirely dedicated to advertising. The copies were published between March and July 1996. The total number of excerpts was 491. No computer aided procedure was used in the evaluation of the texts.

Personal advertisements originate in people's need to find a solution to their loneliness, which is today a global symptom of urban life. It has been found that dense concentrations of people lead to their alienation. This is probably true of large Australian cities, especially those with numerous recent immigration. But Australia is also a country with vast distances between settlements and scarce

population in some places where finding a life partner may be very difficult. People therefore either turn with their problem to various agencies or they put an advertisement in a newspaper or magazine.

Personal advertisements, sometimes appearing under the name of 'Love Lines', 'Matrimonials', 'Meeting Point', 'Courier Connections' and other headings, are small pieces of texts with distinctive features. Unlike commercial advertisements, which are ingeniously created by advertising specialists and address a wide public, personal advertisements are produced by laymen in the field of advertising who wish to present themselves in a way which will attract the 'right' person's attention. In these pieces of phatic communication the writer ('speaker'; usually one person) addresses an unknown, 'ideal' reader ('listener'; usually also one person). The main goal is not to provide information but to mediate contact. Like other texts in contemporary society, personal advertisements have become multi-semiotic, they increasingly combine language with other semiotic forms: written texts incorporate photographs and also the graphic design of individual pieces and later of the whole page become salient features affecting the evaluation by the reader. They are designed to follow the strategy which is current in commercials: AIDA¹

ATTENTION — the reader is attracted

INTEREST — the reader is tempted to continue reading

DESIRE — the reader wishes to meet the advertiser

ACTION — the reader answers

The first phase, i.e. attention drawing, seems to be the most important. What comes in the initial part is given by convention and the advertisers usually read a number of personal ads before producing their own. My material showed that 61% of male advertisers put in the first position, which is usually in bold letters, expressions which refer to nationality (usu. Australian), age, physical attractiveness, professional career or a personal trait. The order of these items and the choice as to which comes first (and is in bold letters) depends entirely on the advert-writer. The writers would then put the aspect they consider 'most attractive' in the first position. In women, physical attractiveness comes first in 34%, nationality only in about 14%, 40% of which are other than Australian (usually Asian), i.e. 5.6% of the total.

To give the reader the feeling of objectivity of the texts, most personal advertisements are written in the third person singular, thus giving the illusion of judgement by a detached person. A different procedure, 'departure from the usual', especially imitation of direct address (like in telephoning 'Hi! I am Chris/an attractive blonde and I ...') is usually used to stimulate even more the reader's curiosity and reinforce his/her attention.

As suggested above, the study considered male and female advertisers separately. The reason was that gender related studies, namely Deborah Tannen's,

¹ (explanations adapted to the needs of personal ads)

found that women and men practise a sort of cross-cultural communication when talking to each other. Messages sent by a person of one gender are perceived through, what she calls, 'an asymmetrical filter'. This means that the semantics of an expression can be different for men and for women, there may be different connotations and thus different aspects may be less appealing for one or the other sex. Tannen says that 'men communicate in order to be respected while women to be liked' (in: Virginia Langsdorf 1994.10).

Australian nationality is explicitly quoted by more than 25% of advertisers. This is especially so among men in *The Daily and Sunday Telegraph* and *Weekly Southern Courier*. These papers appear in Sydney where numerous minorities of non-European descent have settled down. For their tabloidy character, they do not require high literacy from the reader. Their readership is probably wider than of *The Age* in Melbourne.

The following advertisements seem to testify to Australia as a 'melting pot':

- Ex. 1 (C104)²: **AUSSIE** gent, 28, 6'3", slim built, brown hair, blue eyes ...
- Ex. 2 (Ad 33): **A WARM & CARING** gentleman aged 34, would like to meet a lady ... I am first generation Australian so any nationality would be O.K.
- Ex. 3 (Ad C11): **SRI LANKAN AUSTRALIAN** handsome university educated bachelor 34 years, 5'4", seeks attractive lady for friendship/relationship. ... Nationality open.

The Australian National Dictionary from 1988, however, gives the following definitions of 'Australian':

1. AN ABORIGINAL
2. A NON-ABORIGINAL PERSON NATIVE OR RESIDENT TO AUSTRALIA

It is quite obvious that the ads do not even admit the first definition. This view may be supported by a report on an interview with white University students in Australia which revealed that 'to meet an Australian' definitely did not mean 'to meet a Koori', nor a non-Caucasian or Mediterranean but most likely someone of Anglo-Saxon background. If a person was Caucasian born overseas then the person was usually considered 'a new Australian' (cf. Langsdorf 1994.31)

² The codes attached to the advertisements (e.g. C104) serve for further reference and are not relevant for this paper.

Men labelling themselves as 'Australian' or quite frequent 'Aussie' to suggest informality and friendliness are most probably suggesting that they are Caucasians born in Australia, sometimes further supporting their race by stressing the blue colour of their eyes and fair hair. Some readers may object here and say that nationality and race are two different things. It seems, however, that white Australians understand the concept of 'nation' in the 'primary sense of a racial group rather than a politically organized grouping' (Williams 1988.213). To be able to label oneself 'Australian' is definitely considered a positive asset, something that can evoke respect from the prospective partner.

Advertisements in which men make 'Australian or Aussie' part of their self description, convey several degrees of 'Australianness'.

The strongest may not even explicitly say 'AUSTRALIAN':

Ex.4 (AD 42): **SOUTHERN HIGHLANDS MALE**
 born and bred, aged 38 ...

The meta message here is : 'My roots are here', which further suggests that unless one is born and grown up in Australia, is not a 'true Australian'.

This ad exemplifies that 'ideology need not function at the level of conscious or intentional bias' (Stubbs 1996.93), and that 'ideological elements which go into producing and interpreting the text may be sparsely represented in the text' (Fairclough 1995.74). Fairclough further points out that it is important to consider *absences* from the text, as 'what is absent from a text is often as significant as what is „in“ a text'.(ibid.5).

The men who feel fully Australian, and especially the younger generation, do not hesitate to use the informal 'AUSSIE', often collocated with 'guy' or 'male', i.e. 'Aussie guy', 'Aussie male'. This collocation has not been found in cases when some other nationality is mentioned and one can presume that the implication is Anglo-Saxon background:

Ex. 5 (AD 40): **AUSSIE GUY**, 5'8, 38yrs. old, ...
 ash blond hair, ... Goulburn area,
 interests include bush walking, beach....

People whose background is different from Anglo-Saxon introduce themselves as in:

Ex. 6 (C28): **GOODLOOKING EUROPEAN/
 AUSTRALIAN GENT** 31y.o., ...
 seeks feminine female European or
 Australian, 24–29, attractive, intelligent,
 for friendship/relationship.

or

Ex. 7 (Ad 61x): I am a **SCOTTISH AUSTRALIAN**
 gentleman looking for a well-groomed

feminine woman who lives in South. Subs ...

Ex. 8 (Ad C18): **GREEK AUSTRALIAN** 55yo., interested,
going to movies ... looking for a lady ...

None of these Australians of other than implicitly presupposed Anglo-Saxon background would collocate their origin with the informal expression 'AUSSIE' (there is no 'Scottish or Greek or Sri Lankan Aussie', not to speak of an 'Asian Aussie')

If we look back at Example 2 (Ad 33), the writer says 'I am a first generation Australian'. He does not describe himself as 'first generation Aussie'. We may presume that he comes from some other country than England. If we look at the way he invites the prospective partner, the meta-message is 'I am not prejudiced, there is more tolerance in me than there might be in a full-blood white Australian', which may further imply 'I am not racist (which you may not be able to say about Aussies).'

Language in use is seldom transparent. Stylistic choices the speaker (writer) makes carry different ideologies. Often the speaker (writer) is not conscious of the underlying meanings.

White Australians who chose to describe themselves as 'Aussies' do not convey only informality as one may judge by the definitions the dictionaries (Longman, Oxford) give. 'Aussie' (or 'Aussie guy') seems to refer to a person who is laid-back, easy-going, with a life-style which includes the beach culture. Men who include nationality in self-description and who may be presumed to hold different values and have a different life-style (e.g. mention their profession), do not use 'Aussie' in the adjectival part of the collocation ('Australian businessman'). 'Aussie' has not been found to be collocated with 'gentleman'. The exclusion of non-whites from the concept of 'Australian' may be traced in :

Ex. 9 (C44): **AUSSIE** 40, seeks **AUSSIE** or **ASIAN**,
35-40, for casual or permanent relationship.
Sports, beaches, fishing, car racing ...

Here the meta-message is, 'if you are born in Asia or your ancestors came from Asia you cannot be labelled 'Australian'.

Some advertisers are even more discriminative:

Ex. 10 (C80): **SINCERE** Australian Christian man
seeking young lady ... Asian or European
with a view to permanent relationship.

The meta message here may be 'if you are of other than Anglo-Saxon background, you are not a 'true' Australian (irrespective of what your passport says)'.
The labels composed of two nationalities, like Ex. 3 (Ad C11) (**SRI LANKAN AUSTRALIAN**, handsome university educated bachelor ... Nationality open),

may imply that the person is established in Australia, has no job problems, which means security. He does not advertise in order to meet and marry an Australian citizen which would enable him to settle down and get the work permit. His culture is not the culture of the dominant majority. Nationality open may be suggesting that if not said so only women of Sri Lankan or relative descent may respond.

Having seen how the Australians of non Anglo–Saxon background see themselves we can now turn to self–descriptions of Anglo–Saxon Australians:

Ex. 11 (Ad 90): **AUSTRALIAN GUY** seeks **ASIAN** lady, prefer 26 – 36. I'm 35, 5'10", active, good built, a gentleman who likes movies, dining, reading & outdoor activities ... Aussie on the outside, warm, caring, romantic & intelligent on the inside.

The meta–message of this ad is again : 'If you are of Asian origin, you are NOT Australian.' The fact that one is not 'Australian' is a positive asset here. 'Aussie (on the outside)' means for him a harsh, crude and unimaginative person. He may be wishing an Asian woman as she will appreciate his qualities more than a white woman who usually expects them in a prospective partner.

For a woman, to label oneself or be labelled **AUSTRALIAN**, is probably not such a desirable asset as it is in men. If we look at the advertisements of men who explicitly quote both their nationality and the nationality desired in the prospective partner, which is usually in men who do not consider themselves 'established' Australians (e.g. Ex.13 (C69): 'Greek/Australian ... prefer European or Australian'), only 6% of them mention '**AUSTRALIAN**'. This label, however, comes with some other nationality, such as in the example above:

Ex. 12 (C44): **AUSSIE** 40, seeks **AUSSIE** or **ASIAN** ...

or

Ex. 13 (C69): I am Greek/Australian , 29yo ...
Prefer European or Australian 21–29 yo
for relationship.

Australian women are usually desired by men of another nationality than Australian, such as:

Ex. 14 (C 137): **BRAZILIAN** born, European background
guy, 25, dark hair, fair complexion,
wants to meet Aussie/Kiwi girls to 25
for friendship/relationship.

The probable meta message of this advertisement is that the man wants to settle down in Australia, he does not feel strongly about his cultural ties since he stresses several cultures in his background and he wants to integrate and accept the Anglo/Saxon heritage which is the dominant heritage of the white population. He may not object to following his partner to New Zealand, should that be the case.

The statistics show that women in general do not mention their nationality (whatever this may be) as frequently as men do (men in 27%, women in 14%) though it is the women who usually carry the cultural traditions in the family. In my material, only about nine percent of women mention their Australian nationality. Instead, the description of fair skin, blond or light brown hair and blue or green eyes seems to be a frequent substitute for explicit mentioning of nationality. The reason for this coding may be searched for in the patriarchal character of Australian society which does not favour women interested in politics but rather expects them to be home makers and understanding companions of their male partners. By proclaiming their national identity the advertisers imply their political awareness.

The following advertisements are typical examples of racial (national) coding:

Ex. 15 (AD 014): **LADY 47**, blonde, green eyes, slim,
5'4, loves dancing, music, dining ...
seeks ...

Ex. 16 (Ad 09): **FEMALE 39**, ... 5ft, medium built,
blue eyes, fair hair ... seeks gent ...
who is financially stable.

The image of a woman of Asian origin seems to be very positive and her qualities desirable among Australian men. Asian women who still observe the traditions of their culture treat men as superior and Australian men may find this fact flattering. Women of Asian origin seem to willingly accept this unequal relationship and therefore it is possible to find advertisements like:

Ex. 17 (Ad CO21): **FIJIAN/INDIAN** lady 28yrs. seeking
AUSSIE man for relationship view marriage.

or

Ex. 18 (AD071): **ASIAN LADIES** attractive, stylish,
caring and kindhearted between 25–35
would like to meet professional
AUSTRALIAN/EUROPEAN gentlemen
for permanent relationship.

The meta messages here are that it is the white man with whom the Asian woman will experience no poverty. She is ready to put up with any treatment in exchange for a permanent home outside Asia. By quoting explicitly the desired nationality in the prospective partner they contribute to the national awareness in Australian men.

On the other hand this may add to the cringe among Asian men in Australia.

There is only one advertisement which mentions an Asian as a prospective male partner, but even here an Australian alternative is mentioned:

Ex. 19 (AD CO 15y): **ASIAN** lady looking for **ASIAN**
or **AUSTRALIAN** guy with no ties
for casual relationship.

The message here probably is: 'It's only casual, not for a long time perhaps. Just someone to take me out.'

Non-Asian women who mention their nationality in self description only rarely specify the desired nationality in the prospective partner, as no nationality is explicitly specified in the following example .

Ex. 20 (Ad 035): **ARIES** English lady, attractive, ...
interests are dancing, dining, thorough-
bred horses, entertaining... seeks
a tall 5'9in +, well groomed businessman
who knows how to treat a lady ...

This woman is probably looking for someone of Anglo-Saxon background who will give her the experience of English upper class traditional way of life. She uses expressions connected with the English upper class life-style: '... thoroughbred horses ... well groomed ...'

Neither other female advertisers tend to mention the desired nationality. However, the physical qualities often point to a Caucasian:³

Ex. 21 (Ad 036): **ATTRACTIVE** well dressed ... lady.
Seeks a 5'10 gent ... solidly built ...

To sum up. The study showed some ideological aspects (possible underlying meanings) in advertisements which express obvious national and race awareness

To be Australian is a quality proudly referred to by a significant number of advertisers.⁴ One may wonder why it is more important for men than women.

³ There are very few Black people of African origin (whose physical features may correspond to the description) in Australia and therefore they are very unlikely to be taken into consideration.

⁴ AU nationality explicitly quoted:
Men: 83 out of 247 ads in age groups 20-50

By stressing their Australian nationality men proclaim their affiliation to the dominant group which carries the power in society. Patriarchy is still the dominant ideology and power is supposed to go with men. Power also evokes respect. Women, who rarely mention their Australian nationality but rather their physical beauty and who frequently look for someone financially secure (aspect not analysed here) conform to the role that is expected from them. In Asian women, because of the image and reputation they have in Australia as home-makers, the note on nationality in self-description adds to their desirability. In a patriarchal society women belong to the private sphere and not to the public sphere of career and politics.

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