

Translingualism in Politics

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In this article, Salyards explores the connection between translingualism and US politics. Through the analysis of recent campaign advertisements, multicultural American politicians, and general history, the author demonstrates the necessity of cultural awareness in politics today.

Since before middle school most US students have been taught that the United States is a “melting pot” of ethnicity and culture. So why doesn’t our government represent that same kind of diversity? As of the 2018 midterm elections Congress is more racially and culturally diverse than ever, but white men still make up the majority of both the House of Representatives and the Senate (Zweigenhaft). Most Americans could probably agree that the United States, as a whole, is becoming (generally) more tolerant of different cultures, but after analyzing a few 2018 campaign ads, it’s become clear to me that this does not stand true for all aspects of politics. As a matter of fact, roughly a month before I began writing this, President Trump tweeted an anti-immigrant campaign ad which has been compared to former president George H.W. Bush’s widely criticized, arguably racist “Willie Horton ad” (Levitz). This leads me to ask the question: In a country that’s growing more culturally diverse every year, how important is it for our political leaders to have knowledge about cultures other than their own? In this article I’ll be examining the effect of cultural awareness on politics.

Specifically, I'm going to be focusing on **translingualism**. Essentially, translingualism concerns the ability to communicate with people of different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, acknowledging the connectivity and relationships between those cultures and languages. In bilingual/multilingual education, translingualism refers to the constant transfer of knowledge from one language to another, and vice versa; students use the knowledge they've gained from each of their languages simultaneously. Though this definition isn't exactly the same as translingualism in literacy (don't worry, you don't have to be bilingual to practice translingualism in literacy), it does serve the purpose of emphasizing the idea that translingualism is a fluid process, involving movement through different languages/cultures. After all, "translingualism" literally means "through language(s)." The ability to communicate throughout different cultures is a necessary aspect of successful American politics, and this can be proven through the analysis of and connection between campaign ads and translingualism, with references to **CHAT** terminology. CHAT stands for cultural-historical activity theory and includes seven terms which help us analyze and create text.

Campaign Ads as a Genre

Considering I'll be examining multiple campaign ads throughout this article, let's start by taking a look at some of the **genre conventions** of campaign advertisements. **Genre** is defined as a specific type of text (in this case, campaign ads); genre conventions, therefore, are the commonly recognized features specific to a certain genre, or, in our case, common features of campaign advertisements. Generally, these ads are long enough to get a point across but short enough not to frustrate the everyday Joe simply trying to watch a television program or YouTube video. So, let's say an average of around thirty seconds. In these thirty seconds, the candidate's goal is to either get you to vote for them or get you to not vote for their opponent. For instance, have you ever seen a commercial with that deep male voice telling you all of the terrible things so-and-so voted for or against? Then maybe they asked if you could trust someone like that to represent you in government? This is an example of a negative ad; the idea behind this is that the viewers would either vote for the candidate/party responsible for the ad because they feel there's no other choice, or perhaps not vote at all. A less controversial style of campaign ad is a positive ad, in which a candidate tells you why you should vote for them. Regardless of whether the advertisement is negative or positive, politicians typically express strong opinions on one side of the political spectrum. This is where hateful, and sometimes racist, campaign ads can come into play.

America has a history of discriminatory campaign ads, but I'll solely be focusing on advertisements from the 2018 midterm elections because, yes, it's still happening! I already implied that these hateful ads are a result of the "need" to express a strong political opinion in order to have a successful campaign. As you are probably aware, a huge issue in 2018 US politics was immigration, specifically from Mexico. On October 31st, 2018, Donald Trump tweeted a questionable campaign ad in support of Republican midterm candidates. This video features a criminal, who happens to be an undocumented immigrant from Mexico, stating his lack of regret for murdering police officers and threatening to kill more. The video includes the bolded words, "Democrats let him into our country," then a few seconds later, "Democrats let him stay" (Levitz). This advertisement definitely reinforces the preexisting criminal stereotype of Mexican immigrants, additionally blaming the crimes committed by this man on all Democrats. President Trump and the Republican party used an issue many Republicans feel strongly about (immigration) in order to encourage them to vote for candidates of their party. However, was attacking Mexican immigrants the best way to accomplish this goal?



Figure 1: QR code for President Trump's tweet, linking a 2018 Republican campaign ad.

Before we dive into that, let's examine another arguably racist campaign ad from the most recent midterm election. One of the most questionable campaign ads is that of congressman Duncan Hunter who attacked the supposed Muslim faith of his opponent Ammar Campa-Najjar accused him of being a terrorist, called him a "security risk" and accusing him of trying to "infiltrate Congress," family ties to terrorism and the Muslim faith with no actual evidence (Levitz). The ad describes Campa-Najjar as "a Palestinian-Mexican, millennial Democrat" in an insulting tone, which targets a few different groups of people in addition to the aforementioned Muslim stereotyping (Levitz). In creating this campaign ad, Hunter's team probably didn't consider how using his opponent's religion, ethnicity, and age against him would negatively affect the **reception** of the ad. As defined by Joyce Walker, "[r]eception deals with how a text is taken up and used by others," or, simply put, how the audience reacts to a text (75). By implying Campa-Najjar is a terrorist because of his ethnicity and assumed religion, this advertisement easily appears Islamophobic to viewers (this is the viewers' reception of the ad), therefore potentially hurting Hunter's voter turnout.



Figure 2: Screenshot of Hunter's ad targeting his opponent's religion, taken from Duncan Hunter's YouTube channel.

This Sounds Familiar

This whole ‘white men in power lacking respect for other cultures’ thing isn’t really a new concept. In fact, in my college English 101 course we read a story about a group of white scientists traveling to Mozambique, a country in Africa, in order to educate some of its inhabitants and study the environment. The author of the story, Mia Couto, spoke of his personal experiences with translingualism as a translator between the people of Mozambique and the scientists. This story isn’t much different than stories of other white people going to Africa to “provide aid.” They go with good intentions, but they don’t really take into consideration the culture of the people they’re supposed to be “helping” or what their reception will be. For instance, these Swedish scientists went to Mozambique in the hopes of giving these “poor African people” some form of education. The only thing on their minds was the good they were going to be doing “helping” the people of Mozambique, so they didn’t think about taking any time to learn about their culture (Couto).

The author’s main focus in the story is the differences between the Swedish language and the Portuguese and Chidindinhe languages (the languages of the Mozambicans) combined with the differences between the two cultures. (Remember, translingualism refers to communication between and through languages and cultures.) The language and culture barrier presented clear issues from the start. Couto mentioned that the Swedish men introduced themselves as “scientists,” but there is no word for “scientist” in the Chidindinhe language. The men were introduced by the translator rather as the language’s word for “witchdoctor,” so they were giving off the wrong impression from the very first meeting (Couto). This is an example of a difference between the actual languages/translations.

Couto goes on to describe a few other miscommunications between the scientists and the Mozambicans, mostly due to cultural differences rather than differences between the actual languages themselves. Arguably the most significant example of these miscommunications involves the entire reason the Swedish scientists went to Mozambique in the first place. The scientists explained that they were there “to work on the environment,” but, as Mia Couto writes, “in [the local Mozambican] culture, the idea of the environment has no autonomous meaning” (237). While this is also a translation issue, I’d argue to say this situation deals more with a difference in culture. The Swedish scientists were clearly very concerned with the environment, which seems to be a part of their culture. They probably didn’t think about the fact that the people they were visiting come from a different culture, where something that is so important to the Swedish men is nonexistent, or at least a very different concept.

Because there is no single word for “environment” in the Chidindinhe language, the translator chose the word *ntumbuluku*, which refers to what many of us would call “The Big Bang.” So basically, due to cultural and linguistic differences, the Mozambicans thought these scientists came to them to talk about the beginning of time, when in reality they were there to talk about problems with the environment. The entire situation ended up being one whole misunderstanding, which could have been avoided if the scientists worked on their **representation** before speaking to the people in Mozambique. The CHAT term, representation, can have a few different definitions, but for this instance, I’ll use part of Joyce Walker’s definition from “Just CHATting.” Representation includes “the ways we talk about the text or the plans we make in our heads” (75). In this case the text is the scientists’ presentation to the Mozambicans. The scientists didn’t think about researching and adapting to their audience, so they weren’t successful in Mozambique. If they would’ve considered their representation more deeply, perhaps the scientists would have not only created plans for their study and teachings but also for interacting with the community they were conducting their research in.

So, Do We Need Translingualism?

The story of the Swedish scientists in Mozambique is the best way for me, personally, to understand translingualism, so hopefully when I break this down it’ll be the best way for you to understand it, too. Basically, translingualism isn’t the ability to speak every single language or anything like that; as I described earlier, it relates more to the ability to understand and communicate effectively with people of different cultures. You can

speak every single language in the world and still not be successful when it comes to translanguaging. I think a lot of this has to do with simply caring to understand someone else's culture or language, then doing the research and taking the actions to prove so.

Something else we talked about in my English class were the differences between asking a Spanish-speaking person and German-speaking person to describe a bridge. Someone who speaks Spanish would be more likely to describe a bridge as big and strong, while someone who speaks German would be more likely to describe a bridge as beautiful and elegant. This is because in Spanish the word for "bridge" is masculine, while the German word for "bridge" is feminine. This shows how language affects our culture and the way we think about things. Language goes way deeper than the actual words themselves, which is the main idea behind translanguaging.

So, what does this have to do with American politics? Well, pretty much everything. In the beginning of this article when I was discussing campaign ads I mentioned the lack of cultural acceptance in a couple of the ads from the last midterm election. This is comparable to the Swedish scientists' failure to accept the differences between their culture and the Mozambican culture of that area. Because the scientists chose to remain uneducated about this new culture, their mission failed. I believe politics works the same way, except we're electing people to help run our entire country instead of leading a small study.

The United States isn't made up solely of white men (strange, right?) therefore when politicians (often white men) are putting out campaign ads, their audience is filled with different cultures to appeal to. Not everyone in the US is going to have the same culture as whoever is running for office. Therefore, if candidates choose to ignore that fact and release borderline racist campaign ads, they're not communicating effectively with the people they're supposed to represent. In other words, the reception of the ad (how the audience reacts to it) doesn't align with the candidate's representation (how the candidate or their team thought about and planned the ad). The best way to avoid this issue is to acknowledge that we live in a country that allows us to experience so many different cultures. Politicians should celebrate this instead of targeting and stereotyping minorities. In order to do so, though, they need to be educated about cultures other than their own.

Cultural awareness isn't an attractive quality in a candidate only to minorities. For example, I'm white and a candidate can have a very similar culture to mine, but if they don't respect or care to learn about other cultures, they won't get my vote; I want representatives who will advocate for everyone they're representing, not solely those with the same culture or background as

them (even if that includes myself). Cultural awareness and translingualism are becoming more and more important to Americans today, regardless of someone's culture or background. The use of social media has helped with this, and I can only guess it will continue to do so. People are becoming more aware of the social injustices that are happening every day, and information about other cultures is literally at our fingertips now.

Making Progress

Along with this rise in cultural awareness comes a rise in politicians from non-dominant groups. As I said before, the 2018 midterm elections brought with them a more diverse Congress than ever before (in aspects of gender, race/ethnicity, and religion), and there were a lot of “firsts” that year in government. For example, the first two Muslim women were elected to Congress during these elections, Rashida Tlaib and Ilhan Omar, as well as the first two Native American women, Deb Haaland and Sharice Davids. Connecticut and Massachusetts also, respectively, elected their first Black congresswomen, Jahana Hayes and Ayanna Pressley, and Texas actually elected its first two Latina congresswomen, Veronica Escobar and Sylvia Garcia (Reinstein).

The fact that a Congress, which at one point consisted of only upper-class men, can become so much more diverse in just a single election means that the United States is rapidly becoming not only more diverse but also more accepting. This also means tolerance for hateful and racist campaign ads is decreasing, so campaign ads like the ones mentioned in the beginning of this article will eventually no longer be the norm (hopefully, at least). However, racism is still very much alive in the political world, and though the reception is usually negative for the most part, it's definitely not impossible to get elected with a racist campaign ad. There is still a lot of work to be done in this area.

Uptake

Throughout the writing and research processes of putting together this article, I learned a few things. These things I learned and other aspects of my learning process can be described as my **uptake**. The first thing I hate to admit I didn't realize before (seeing as it's kind of the whole point of the article) is how many racist campaign ads were aired during this last midterm election. It's nice to think the United States is improving and becoming more accepting (which I still believe to be true), but you can't ignore the hate that

still exists and is getting worse in some forms. I think that awareness is most definitely a part of translanguaging. If you don't realize racism exists, you can't truly understand a culture that faces it.

More generally, I also learned the value of research. I've written a lot of papers with source requirements by just throwing in a few facts from random sources I found mid-essay, and it feels so much better to have actually conducted thorough research on a topic before writing about it as if I know what I'm talking about. This time I actually do know what I'm talking about, and it was a lot easier to organize my article this way, which is an area I struggled in before.

Overall, I now have a deeper understanding of translanguaging, which was my goal for readers of this article, so hopefully that means I accomplished it. Translanguaging was something I was very fascinated by when we learned about it in class, but it was hard for me to put it into words. I felt like I had a basic understanding of it, but now I'm a lot more comfortable explaining what translanguaging is and just how important it is to be translanguaging in America today.

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