



# Applying “Social Indexicality” in Understanding Contested Intercultural Interactions



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# China Bans Nike Ad

(Nov 2004)



LeBron James in “Chamber of Fear”

# *“Chamber of Fear”*

**LeBron James = “The Chosen One”**

*defeats 5 foes:*



**Hype** (~exageros)

**Temptation**

**Envy**

**Complacency**

**Self-doubt**

*“And so the Chosen One was forced to face his fears.”*

(5 ‘rooms’ in videogame setting)

# *“Chamber of Fear”: Intended Message*

Frank Pan (Nike’s China marketing director):

- message = *“players can overcome their internal fear ... can improve themselves”*
- style = based on Bruce Lee films  
(LeBron James = a big fan)
- Nike didn’t intend to offend



James: *"It was not intended to hurt anybody or any culture or anything like that . . . We put the ads together basically for kids."*

## “Chamber of Fear”: Message “Uptake”

- “blasphemes national practices and culture”
- violates regulation: “all advertisements must uphold national dignity and interest, and respect the motherland’s culture”
- “The ad has received an indignant response from Chinese viewers.”

## *Just different “interpretations”?*

State Administration for Radio, Film and TV (China):

“Offensive to nation’s dignity”

vs.

Frank Pan (Nike): Nike apologizes, saying:

*“In China, there are 1.3 billion people, so some people have different opinions. We were encouraging the idea that players can overcome their fear ... to improve themselves.”*

*“We believe that this approach is very Asia-relevant.”*



# *Just different “interpretations”?*

## Western news reports:

“The statement doesn’t specify why the ad was offensive.”

## Analysis of ad:

- **Social Indexicality** >< **Context** (micro/macro)
  - Creative appropriation vs. (Mis)appropriation
- => powerful tools for understanding/avoiding conflict



# Indexicality



## (1) Referential indexicality (linguistics)

- Language that “points to” a concept
- Meaning depends on words & context

Exs: “here, there; now, today; he, they, I”

Yesterday my friend texted me and said,

“OK, **now** **I**’m going to tell **you** how to get **here**.”

(**yesterday**) (**my friend**)

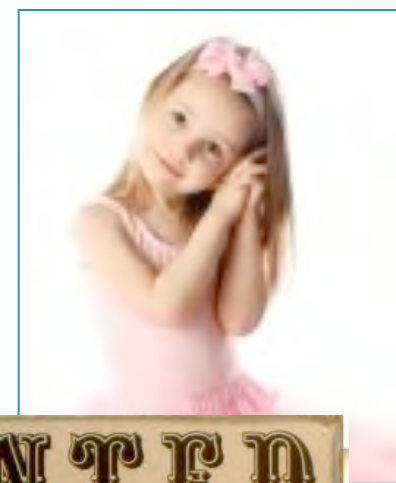
(**me**)

(**his house**)





## (2) Social Indexicality



“Points to” social identities/qualities



\*\* Not restricted to language; also skin color, physical/facial features, clothing, “animal features”

# Representation in the Media

Language/Accents/Physical Features/Dress, etc.

= index character

= index place/other contexts

Stereotypes/abstractions

= 'necessary shortcuts' to characterizations

= *but consequences*

Result = builds alliances & boundaries

(national, regional, ethnic, racial, economic ...)



# Indexicality



- (2) **Social indexicality** = “points to” identities/qualities
- => *identities* (e.g., ethnic, class, region, gender, age)
  - => *qualities* (e.g., clever, ignorant, lazy, dirty, clean)

## Meaning:

= social/cultural (*not explicitly* in words/images)

## Context:

= *presupposing* (must share some context)

= *creative* (can produce/create part of the context)

\*\* Often not aware of all aspects of social indexicality.



# *Social Indexicality*

## U.S.

“Southern accent”

Identities?

Qualities?

(+/- Agree)





# U.S. Southerners

## Multi-indexicality of “Southern Accent”

- + family values, spiritual, polite, friendly, charm
- hick, backward, superstitious, racist, uneducated

## Indexicality of social qualities: *Whose perspective ??*

><

Relations of Power  
(history/politics/economics)



# Social Indexicality

## Examples in Brazil?

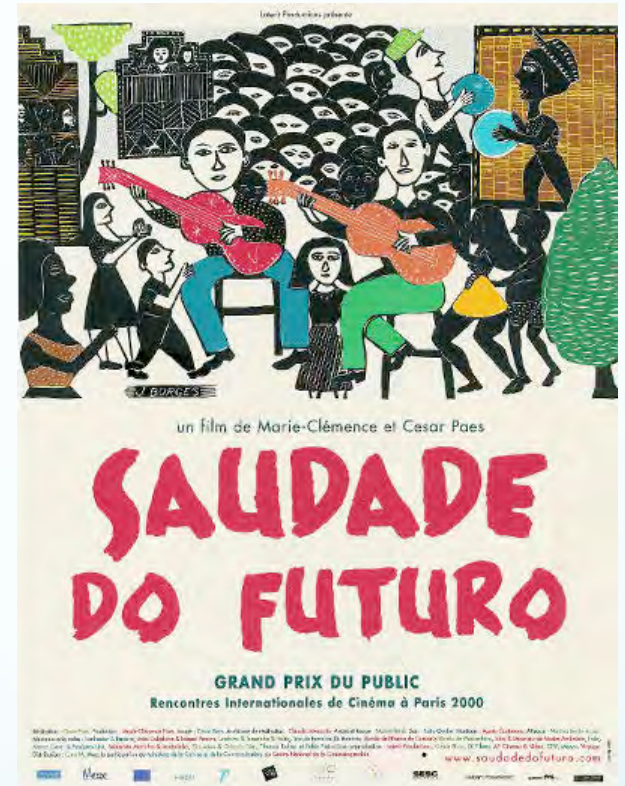
- Nordestino dialect(s)?

Identities?

Qualities?

(Agree +/—)

(Multi-indexicality)





# “Mock Spanish” Humor (J. Hill; U.S.)

*“Mis-appropriation” of Spanish by monolingual Anglos*



# *Tactics of (Mis)Appropriation in Mock Spanish*

1. semantic pejoration
2. euphemism
3. add “Spanish” morphology
4. hyperanglicization; bold mispronunciation

# Tactics of (Mis)Appropriation

## 1. semantic pejoration:

*adiós* => “good riddance”; disloyalty)

*hasta la vista* => “you’ re going to die”

*amigo, compadre* => ‘no friend of mine’ (ironic use)

*nada* => “worthless; less than nothing”

*mañana* => “laziness; procrastination”



# Semantic pejoration



That's Spanish for: Sure, go ahead and leave your friends, the only people who really care about you, the ones who would loan you their last thin dime, give you the shirts off their backs, fine, just take off!

- Adiós! That's Spanish for:  
Sure, go ahead and leave your friends, the only people who really care about you, the ones who would loan you their last thin dime, give you the shirts off their backs. Fine, just take off!

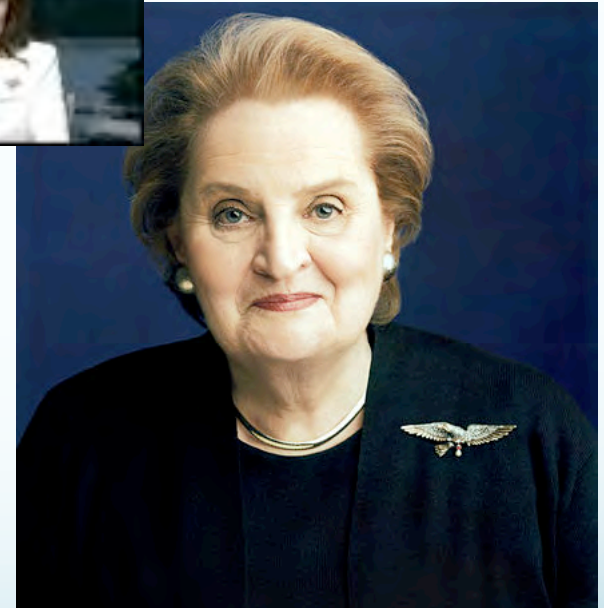
[Adiós= disloyalty; good riddance]

# Tactics of (Mis)Appropriation

## 2. Euphemism



Other:  
*loco* = crazy; *casa de pee pee*



[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vR7e\\_5qIWCQ&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vR7e_5qIWCQ&feature=related)



# *Tactics of (Mis)Appropriation*

## 3. “Spanish morphology”



El Cheapo Liquor Store in Marfa, Texas

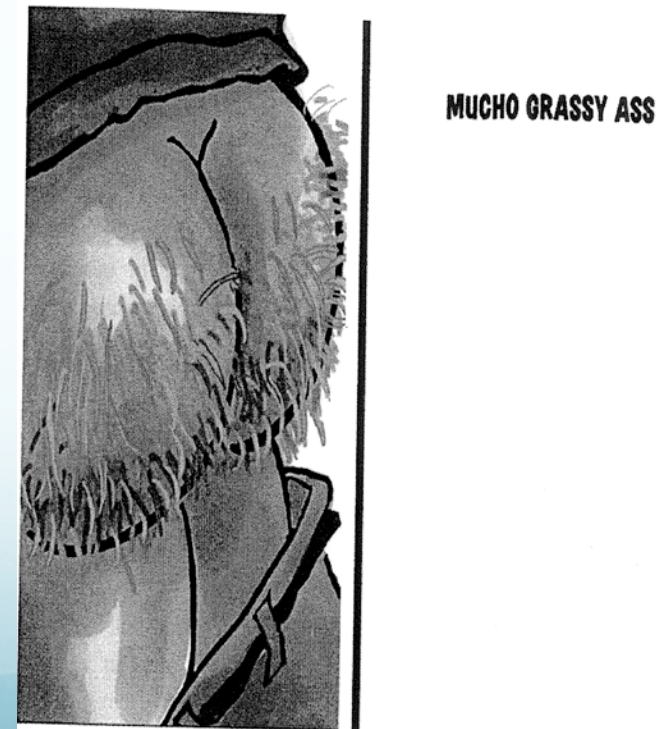
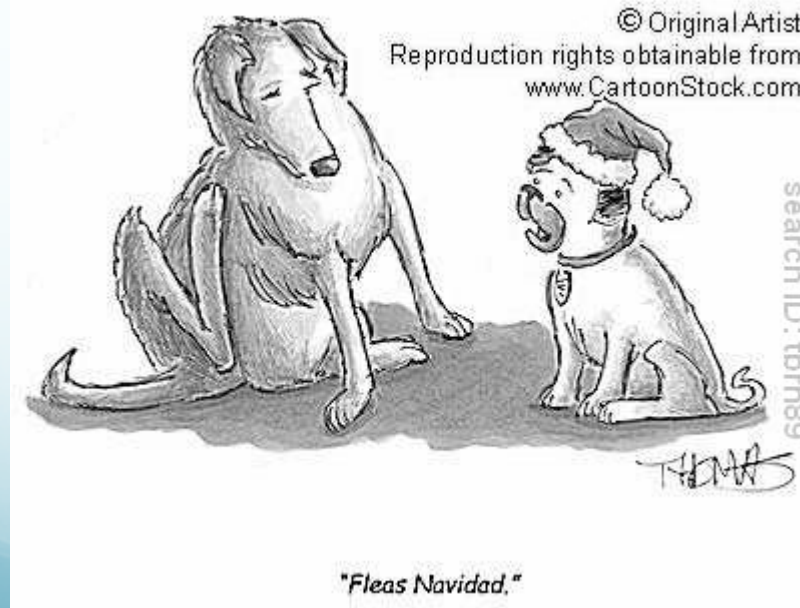
[http://www.elcheapoliquorstores.com/  
index.html](http://www.elcheapoliquorstores.com/index.html)



# Tactics of (Mis)Appropriation

## 4. hyperanglicization; bold mispronunciation

- *fleas navidad* (cf. *feliz navidad*)
- *grassy ass* (cf. *gracias*)



## Dual indexicality in Mock Spanish:

(1) Positive: Anglo user

= clever, sense of humor; regional id; cosmopolitan;  
“American”

(2) Negative: Spanish-language heritage (Mexican-Amer)

= object of humor; non-serious; casual, laid-back,  
lazy; vulgar, insult; negative connotations

:: BUT split metapragmatic awareness

✓ positive = aware; explicit (Direct indexicality)

✓ negative = more covert (Indirect indexicality)

## Context(s) in Mock Spanish:

### Presupposing (established):

- ✓ one must implicitly “get” the negative stereotypes:
  - procrastination (*mañana*)
  - dirtiness (*fleas*)
  - disloyalty (*adiós*)
  - vulgarity (*cojones*)
- ✓ macro contexts (marginalization of Spanish speakers)

### Creative:

- ✓ creates/perpetuates social/linguistic hierarchy
- ✓ builds spaces of “differential belonging” in U.S.

# *IC Competence >< Social Indexicality*

Not just “different interpretations”

How meaning works

- *relational* (N/South; Anglo/Latino; US/China)
- *contextual* (micro >< macro)
- *power/hierarchies*

Social Indexicality

- “*indexical competence*”
- “*indexical empathy*”



# Nike Ad: “Offensive to Nation’s Dignity”

LeBron James in “Chamber of Fear”



# *Intended Message*

**LeBron James = “The Chosen One”**

*defeats 5 foes:*

**Hype** (~exageros)

**Temptation**

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*“And so the Chosen One was forced to face his fears.”*



# *Nike Ad: “Offensive to Nation’s Dignity”*

## **\* Important symbols of traditional Chinese culture \***

=> all depicted as obstacles to James

=> all defeated by him (a foreigner)

✓ **a kung fu master**

✓ **the feitian** (Chinese sacred women who fly through the sky; shown as temptress women trying to seduce James)

✓ **a pair of dragons**

[hype; temptation; complacency]

# Nike Ad: “Offensive to Nation's Dignity”



## Received Message(s)

Chinese bulletin board Netease.com

*"This ad shows Chinese characters losing again and again. It makes our country look helpless against America."*

*"All the Chinese images have been defeated in the end, even including China's totem dragon."*

*"This is hurting China, showing Chinese people are incapable. ... In the ads, flying goddesses and greenbacks are put together, this is tarnishing Chinese culture."*

## *Needed: “Indexical Competence/Empathy”*

### Western news reports:

“The statement doesn’t specify why the ad was  
offensive.”

### Indexical readings:

Direct: LeBron James conquers 5 fears

Direct: LeBron James conquers 5 enemies, most are  
sacred Chinese symbols

Indirect: James/U.S. are more powerful than China

Indirect: historical context: European/US imperialism  
in China

Judged as *misappropriation* of precious Chinese symbols

# “Appropriateness of Appropriation”

1. All cultures are hybrid (borrow) *but*:
2. Contexts >< Relations of Power >< Hierarchies
3. Analytical tools:
  - (multi)indexicality
  - intentionality/uptake
  - if history of oppression:  
control over cultural borrowing



# *Nike Ad: Alternative Visions?*

Yao Ming  
姚明





# Sports Mascots in U.S.

Washington “Red Skins”

Southern Illinois University “Salukis”



# *Cultural Appropriation, Indexicality, Context & Power*

Example- Sports Mascots – “Chief Illiniwek’s last dance”

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TIUZFbhmaLk&feature=related>



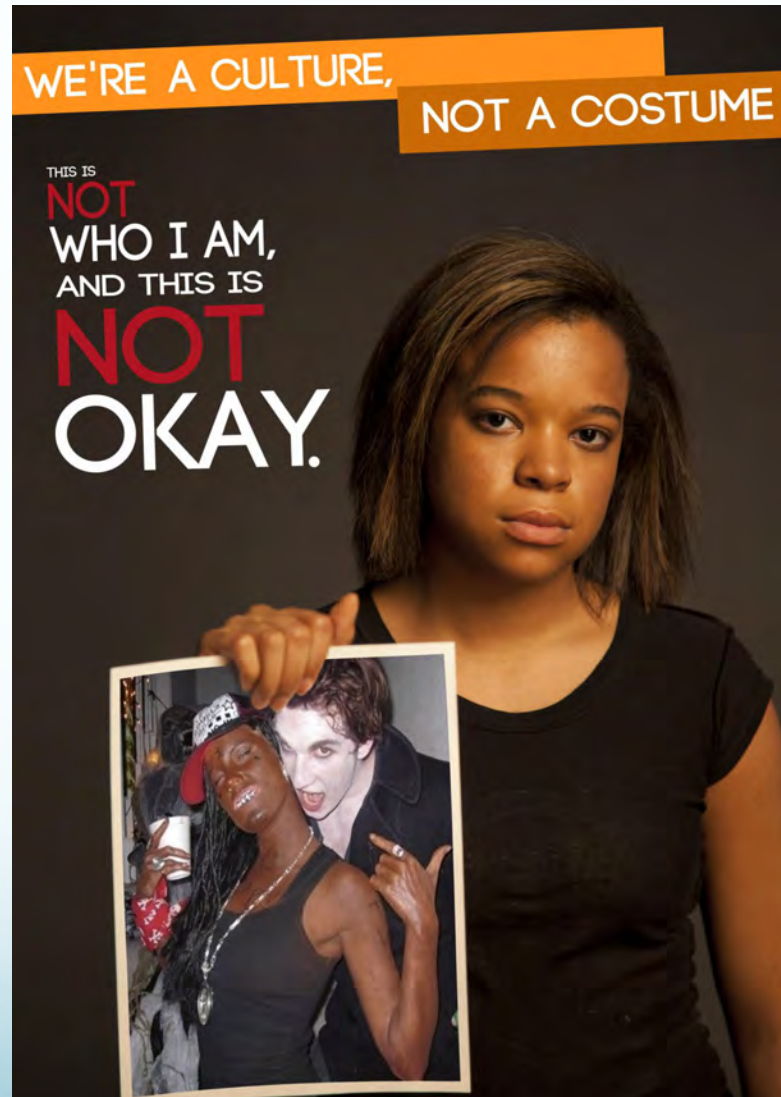
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CIVsf0Pa2Po> = Bucky Badger

# Halloween Costumes (U.S.)

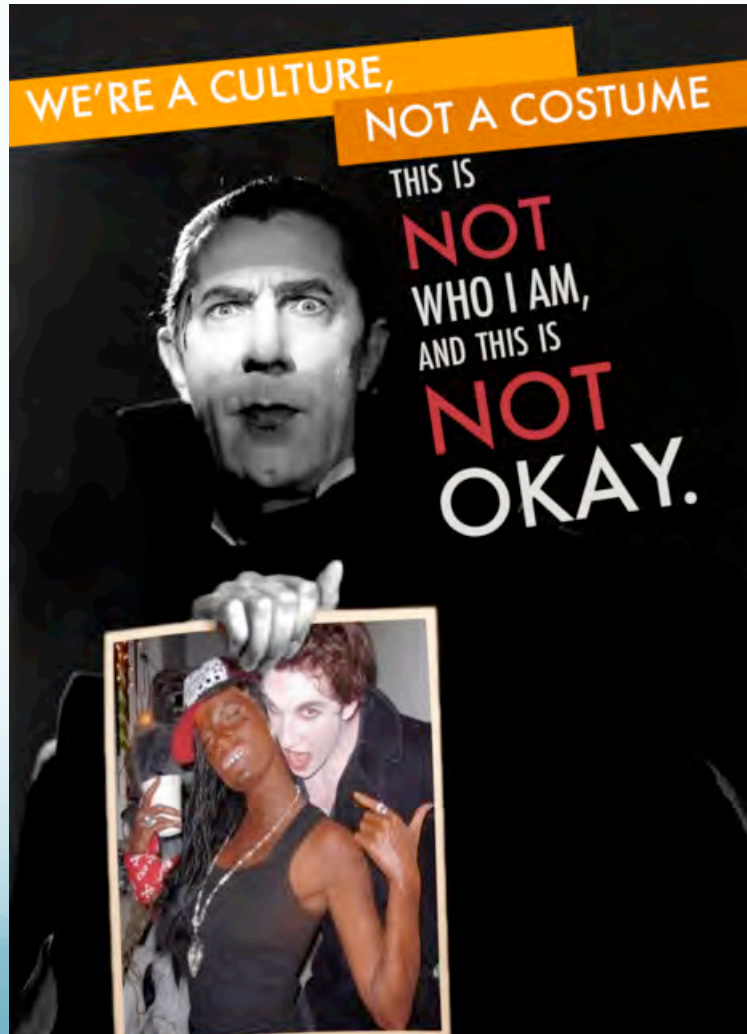




# Halloween Costumes (U.S.)



# Parody: Indexicality? Contexts? Power relations?





# IC Competence >< Social Indexicality

- ✓ Not just “different interpretations”
- ✓ How meaning works
  - *relational* (N/South; Anglo/Latino; US/China)
  - *contextual* (micro >< macro)
  - *power/hierarchies*
- ✓ Social Indexicality
  - “*indexical competence*”
  - “*indexical empathy*”
- ✓ Creative appropriation vs. (Mis)appropriation

