

Semiotically deconstructing parental and adolescent failed communication: It's not what they're saying, it's their words

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ABSTRACT

Language change and creativity among adolescent language use, is nothing new. However, teachers in schools and parents in homes continue to feel left out of the linguistic figured world of the youth that they teach or raise, often leading to either perceived or real failed communication. In this study I offer a thoughtful and perhaps unique social semiotic analysis of the process and motivation for youth creation of new words or the resemanticization of existing words. Understanding the need for youth to create their own linguistic worlds for acceptance into social worlds has less to do with creating a barrier between them and their parents or teachers and more to do with positive identity development, could be the key for unlocking positive communication with the adults in their lives. Within, I put forth the idea that there exist purposeful in-groups and out-groups, of which the out-groups can be further divided into desirable and un-desirable out-groups. It is important to uncover the different affordances of existing terms and to create inventories of new terms and their synchronic meanings and possible diachronic evolution, in order for parents to understand the motive and need for youth creativity with language. Accepting the possibility, that youth are simply constructing and describing the world around them, changes the paradigm of parental-adolescent communication from a gulf or abyss to a potential bridge or a passageway connecting the two worlds.

Keywords: *Adolescents, Communities of practice, Diachronic, Langue, Parole, Signs, Social semiotics, Synchronic.*

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Highlights of this paper

- This paper examines how adolescents create new words and codes, complicating communication with their parents by exploiting the arbitrariness of signs to express their identities and experiences within their peer groups.
- Language is portrayed as a dynamic tool shaped by cultural contexts, where the meanings of signs evolve through social interaction, reflecting diverse worldviews and the need for adolescents to establish in-groups and out-groups distinct from their parents.
- The author argues that for effective communication between parents and adolescents, it is essential for parents to engage with and understand the evolving language of youth, recognizing that these new terms provide insight into adolescents' perspectives and realities.

1. INTRODUCTION

The work of the semiotician is to focus on and problematize the process of the representation of signs (Chandler, 2007) and the relationship between the signifier and signified, with hope to advance the knowledge of how we create meaning in our lives and the reality of the world we live in, or at least the immediate world that surrounds us. What complicates this process and at the same time simplifies it is that signs are arbitrary (Chandler, 2007; Saussure, 1983). The word *trib* could just as easily stand in place for the object cup as the word *cup* does, if that's what had been established by society. In this sense, language becomes an incredibly powerful and culturally weighted tool as the arbitrariness of the signs that compose it, establishes its autonomy in relation to reality (Chandler, 2007). This, as many have posited, makes possible the idea that one's reality can be influenced by one's language, creating culturally diverse people who perceive the world differently (see (Boroditsky, Fausey, & Long, 2009; Lera Boroditsky & Gaby, 2010; Chandler, 1994, 1999; Danesi, 1999; Fausey & Boroditsky, 2008; Fowler, 1991; Gumperz, 1982; Halliday, 1978; Kecskes, 2000a, 2000b; Przymus, 2024; Przymus & Huddleston, 2021; Sapir, 1985; Sinclair, 1991; Whorf, 1940)). The purpose of this paper is to semiotically deconstruct the failed communication of what at times seem to be culturally distinct populations, parents and their adolescent children, by suggesting that perhaps a rationale of this failed communication can be found in adolescents' creative exploitation of the arbitrariness of the sign in the common practice of inventing new words/codes to signify old concepts, creating a signification and understanding only understood in the social context of their intimate communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) and not understood by their parents.

Saussure (1983) and others (see (Chandler, 2007; Levi-Strauss & Tristes, 1972)) modify the idea that signs are completely arbitrary and state that they have to be, in some sense, "relatively arbitrary" (Saussure, 1983) and that there exists a "relative autonomy" that maintains the communicative ability of language between users. "The relationship between signifier and signified is not a matter of individual choice; if it were, then communication would become impossible" (Chandler, 2007). I posit here that adolescents, in creating their identities and through the process of language socialization (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986a) in communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) violate this principal of relative autonomy and do implore individual choice in creating and identifying relationships between signifiers and signified and as a result make communication, at times, impossible with their parents. In this paper, I take a more social semiotic stance and privilege the creative nature of language that springs from co-constructed knowledge creating in dialogues. To light this flame of the social semiotic viewpoint, we look first at Voloshinov (1973) who states that "...individual utterances are what constitute the actual, concrete reality of language, and in that they do have creative value in language." This is done in a dialogic manner.

There is little doubt that by now any parent that has paid even the slightest attention to pop-culture, or to the discourse patterns of their children, have mastered the meanings of such ubiquitous semiotic signs as LOL (laugh out loud) and IDK (I don't know). This was not always the case, however, and most certainly many communicative interactions broke down as the result of parents not being a part of the significant relationship of these forms to their

referents created by the new linguistic structuring of their children and therefore were not able to immediately make sense of the sign or interpret its meaning (Peirce, 1931-1958). The message has not changed, but the structure and the code, has. It's not what their saying, it's their words; a new socially constructed relationship between words and their referents.

1.1. So why do they do it?

Let's take a brief moment to discuss the possible reason for why adolescents play with language, even though it might quite obviously at times lead to labored communication with their parents. Many might look at new codes created for texting simply as an efficient use of language. Others might posit that this reflects the lazy nature of teenagers. Still another possibility is to be rebellious and in so doing, create a new identity; a very important and salient job for adolescents. In being rebellious, one might consider that adolescents are purposefully trying to create an in-group and an out-group (of which their parents reside) in order to gain independence and power, both of which they typically have very little of. However, it's possible that none of these possibilities can fully explain adolescent sign creation. A historical look at the nature of the sign-making process illuminates again a less arbitrary practice and that signs may have been created in an attempt to capture sounds or descriptions of their referents (Danesi, 1999). If we take this perspective, it's possible to conclude that the new words created by adolescents may be an attempt to describe and illustrate their myopic world. It is fast-paced, hard, confusing, instant gratified, or whatever it is, a take-away might be that through creating new forms for old referents, adolescents might just be inviting their parents into a greater understanding of their world through a creative, descriptive sign-making process needed because the old vehicles, for some reason or another, do not adequately represent the new version, their version, of life's objects and experiences. I am not being naïve in suggesting that this is done purposefully or consciously, but certainly on an unconscious level, teenagers may be, instead of closing doors to communication, opening portals to a greater understanding of their lives.

2. THE STUDY: UNDERSTANDING YOUTH'S WORLDVIEW THROUGH UNDERSTANDING THEIR LANGUAGE

Setting: A middle school in the Southwest of the United States.

Teacher: "Hey you guys, can you help me with something?"

Group of four middle school students in the hall: "

Sure Miss, what's up?"

Teacher: "My husband is a doctoral student and he is doing a study on new words made up by kids. Can you tell me any recently made up words that you use that your parents might not understand?"

Middle School Student #1: "You mean like swavy?"

Teacher: "What's swavy?"

Middle School Student #1: "Swavy's like sporting it out, but to the extreme."

Middle School Student #2: "No man, she wants a real word."

Middle School Student #1: "That is a real word. Like, look at him. He's got swerve, but he's not swavy." Now, I got on my Jordan's or when I wear my All Stars, I'm sporting it out to the extreme and I'm swavy.

2.1. The Social Impact on Both the Langue and Parole

Our socially constructed langue structurally constrains our language use (parole), but doesn't completely determine it Chandler (2007) because we have choice. Typically, we choose to follow socially constructed conventions,

but there is power in communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). “The community is necessary if values that owe their existence solely to usage and general acceptance are to be set up; himself the individual is incapable of fixing a single value” (Saussure, 1983). Adolescents in every school setting, from what I can only imagine the beginning of formal schooling, have always formed these kinds of communities, with their own speech.

Below, I will look at a few new words, recently created through the social, dialogic, adolescent culture, and employ the three general principals of semiotic analysis in an attempt to, although new, 1.) Uncover their historical use, 2.) Understand how they are used to shape perceptions of normalcy, and 3.) Take a look at how they influence the worldview of their users and the people around them, with the greater goal of deconstructing the failed communication of parents and their adolescent children.

Table 1 shows an inventory of popular youth terms, separated by current definitions or a synchronic analysis and by past definitions that represent their diachronic evolution. I have also attempted to provide a geographical component to helping to understand how region of country influences the use of signs and their meanings. This synchronic and diachronic representation shows how as Culler (1986) states, “Language is not a nomenclature and therefore its signifieds are not pre-existing concepts but changeable and contingent concepts which vary from one state of a language to another” (p. 32).

When adolescents appropriate an existing term, begin to say it differently, or attach a new, more relevant meaning to it, they are employing change through linguistic performance by way of the parole, not the langue (Culler, 1986). By accomplishing this change through their speech acts, they are constantly modifying their realization of the world through language and thus impacting their system or langue. I posit here that it is important for positive parental-adolescent communication that parents attempt to understand the language of youth, if they are going to understand the worldview of their children. As Jewitt (2009) says, people are not passive users of language, rather active producers of meaning. This describes the agency of youth in producing a meaningful communicative environment.

Table 1. Inventory of adolescent terms (Definitions compiled from personal interviews, phone interviews, texts, emails and from entries in the urban dictionary: <http://www.urbandictionary.com>).

Lexical item	Synchronic	Diachronic	Geographic origins of data for this study
Swerve	To sport things out (In place of swag); an implication of dodging someone; to dismiss or say no to a request; response used when winning an argument with a snarky comeback	To change directions abruptly (v) or an abrupt change of directions (n)	Used in place of swag: U.S. Southwest
Swavy	To sport things out, but up a notch; to represent something or someone with swag; also, a snobbish, rich, smart person	NA	To sport things out: U.S. Southwest
Chinese four eye	To slap someone on the back of the head with a candy tortilla (Presumable a candy tortilla is a pan dulce sold at a Mexican bakery)	NA	U.S. Southwest
Dk	Dirty kid: Socially awkward person with	Donkey Kong (Video game); “don’t know”	Dirty kid originated in Oregon, data from this

Lexical item	Synchronic	Diachronic	Geographic origins of data for this study
	greasy hair, dragon related apparel, off-brand skate shoes, drinks monster, bows instead of waves	commonly used in texting	study comes from U.S. Midwest
Derp	A reply or expression of disdain to an ignorant comment or action;	NA	U.S. Midwest (Derp is used in Australia as underpants)
Gnarly	Beyond radical, beyond extreme, perfection (Can be used for good and bad cases)	Difficult, gnarled, dangerous, challenging, tangled	California: Gnarly=Beyond radical, extreme, perfection Minnesota: gnarly=Tangled, tough, difficulty, dangerous
Crazy check	Monthly stipend from social security disability insurance department	NA	Orlando, FL
Cashing in a wolf ticket	Going to get into a fight	NA	Orlando, FL
catheads	Any kind of shoe that is not brand-name	Term for homemade biscuits in the South	Orlando, FL

3. DISCUSSION

3.1. Diachronic to Synchronic

As we begin to make sense of the current meanings of the terms above and also their diachronic evolution, it would be helpful to first consider why their definitions changed or why the new terms came into existence. To begin, we take a look at Jakobson, Waugh, and Monville-Burston (1990) discussion on the expressive value and the emotive function of language. “Speakers cannot be content with the emotive language they inherited because its affectivity is no longer felt” (p. 108). This serves us very well as an explanation for the divergence of meaning and the creation of new words. Simply put, youth do not want to live their parents’ linguistic world. Taking an example from the inventory, let’s look at the word *swerve*. How and why did *swerve* evolve from diachronically meaning an abrupt change in directions, to meaning the essence of cool today? This evolution can actually be tracked somewhat successfully by looking at the various Urban Dictionary entries for *swerve*. *Swerve* has for sometime now been appropriated by rappers such as D-Ca\$h, Dj Moreau Murphy, and Kanye West to roughly mean to have the ability to dodge, avoid, ignore, slip away from an interaction with someone, disrespect by turning away, etc., all because someone is so cool they are afforded this power. We can see how this is related to the historical definition of an abrupt change in direction. Now, due to its association with popular rap culture, it has taken on a much broader meaning of just having an essence of coolness. In 2001, it was used in the movie *Training Day* by Denzel Washington who says, “*Yeahhhh about to get my swerve on.*” In this instance, Washington appropriated simply the coolness of the term and it has been used as such by youth ever since.

This perhaps is not the whole picture, however. Voloshinov (1973) who was also concerned with the social influence of language and how its creative power of the parole can impact on the immutability of the langue, places importance on the social organization and the immediate conditions of language users/producers (p. 21). For adolescents, acceptance into social groups is not only important, but one could say, crucial for identity formation and survivance. For our discussion here, I will put forth the idea that there exists purposeful in-groups, out-groups, of which the out-groups can be further divided into desirable and un-desirable out-groups. In his 2005 Introduction to Social Semiotics, van Leeuwen draws our focus to paying attention to the registers and regulated use of language in

social context. Youth quite adroitly flow between registers in accordance to the in-group that they want to associate with. This also serves, in many instances, to create out-groups consisting of other youth and adults that are not familiar with the regulated use of language specific to that group and who cannot successfully mimic the register of the group members without being immediately outed as a *poseur*. For members of the in-group, it would be undesirable to be in this out-group. A desirable out-group, however, helps us understand how language, perhaps isn't uniquely social. Jakobson et al. (1990) in a discussion on personal habits and in a reference to the work of Edward Sapir, gives the example that a speaker may not use certain words, that the social group uses, because of some aversion, or as I posit here, as a way to set the speaker apart in a way that gathers attention to the speaker. This is what I refer to as the desirable out-group. This is just another example of dynamic synchrony and linguistic creativity performed by youth as part of the identity creation process.

So then, the interesting, but daunting task of the social semiotician is to uncover the different affordances (Gibson, 1979) of existing terms and/or as we have done here, to create inventories of new terms and their synchronic meanings and possible diachronic evolution. The social semiotician must look at speech acts from the perspective of various points of view, but most importantly focus on the complex relationships of the participants who co-construct the meanings of the signified. This focus on the creative power of the individual is a divergence from the Saussurean perspective that language is a collective construct, in order for it to be understood and comprehended (Hodge, 1988). I chose to use the word *survivance* above in this paper to drive home this exact point. It's not only the perceived survival of adolescents that drives their creative use of language, but also a resistance to being positioned as the same as others, especially their parents.

4. CONCLUSION

Challenging the immutability of the language through inventorying the creativity of adolescent parole, has proven to be a fun activity, but I think also a worthwhile one. Adolescents, much like adults, although we may be more at ease with or just have tiredly accepted the limits and current states of our language, have dynamic, diversified codes that can bend to the needs and absorb the linguistic necessities of different functions in different contexts driven by social, dialogic interactions. Although I posit above that they at times deploy the troops of their creative language purposefully in order to create in-groups and out-groups, and indeed their parents are targeted inhabitants of these out-groups, I more believe that they are simply describing and constructing the world around them in the language that most makes sense to them. Accepting the latter as a possibility changes the paradigm of parental-adolescent communication from a gulf or abyss to a potential bridge or a passageway connecting the two worlds.

In considering the context and the purpose/function of these newly created words, our semiotic analysis is extending beyond semantics, beyond syntax, and into pragmatics. We must give import to the words that come before and after the new terms. What is being expressed together? After all, if they are not socially accepted in the communication community, they do not serve their intended goal. Even though language may appear to be constructed individually, perhaps funneled from a stringent cone of static codes, it is and always has been socially constructed, from experience, from process, and the manifestation of our dynamic, dialogic lives.

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