"It's more fun in the Philippines": Resemiotizing and commodifying the local in tourism discourse

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ABSTRACT

Since globalization is characterized by mobility of resources, the tourism industry is considered as one potential area for those interested in language and globalization. While tourism can be attributed to the growing capitalist dream of exploration, it is replete with asymmetrical hierarchies that are motivated by consumption, exploitation and commodification. This paper examines the Philippines’ campaign, ‘It’s more fun in the Philippines’, a supposedly grassroots initiative which sought individual contributions from the public such as memes that could help promote the Philippines. The paper finds that the linguistic and multimodal resources of contributions chosen for the campaign showcase a pattern of resemiotization: the use of generic expressions and concepts to present the ‘local’. Whereas the original intention of the grassroots initiative was to solicit a diversity of ways to present the Philippines, we find that the official choice of campaign resources has affirmed resemiotization as a linguistic and semiotic strategy of commodification – the repackaging of the local as a construct possessing material value. While much has been said about the use of the local for the global consumer, the paper describes through the lens of language use in the context of globalization how an avowedly ground up and empowering initiative eventually becomes enmeshed in the normalizing processes of globalization.

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1. Introduction

According to Blommaert (2010), language use and meaning-making practices in today’s globalization are implicated in different forms of inequality. Languages as mobile resources are regulated resources and, as such, are deeply enmeshed in layers of structures of power and asymmetrical relationships. Tourism, for instance, is the most representative activity that captures these key dimensions of the sociolinguistics of globalization because, first, it entails mobility of people and fluid interactions between the global and local, and second, it is deeply semiotic in nature as it deploys linguistic and multimodal resources to regulate the creation and communication of meaning to reach out to as many tourist/consumers as possible (Georgakopoulou, 2015).

This paper works within these main assumptions about the role of language use in globalization by drawing on the recent dominant tourism discourse in the Philippines encapsulated by its global campaign, ‘It’s more fun in the Philippines’. This campaign was envisioned as a grassroots initiative meant to encourage ordinary Filipinos to be part of the collective rebranding of the country through tourism (Baldacchino, 2015). The invitation solicited memes and linguistic expressions that could be used to promote and reinvigorate the Philippines as a key tourism destination in the world. While the intention was to deploy an inclusive and supposedly authentic approach to promoting the country through a diversity of representations using indigenous expressions and practices, the study finds that the normalization of the new tourism discourse shows tends to accrue toward the commodification of the local, and this could be seen concretely through the process of resemiotization of the campaign ads. The paper argues that resemiotization as a discursive strategy facilitates the commodification of ‘local’ places, people and practices as part of a broader economic and ideological agenda of state and global institutions.

This paper articulates current theoretical insights on the sociolinguistic dimensions of globalization mentioned above (Blommaert, 2010; Pennycook, 2012; Heller, 2010; Dunn, 2005). With the advent of crowdsourcing campaigns that attempt to capture ground up indigenous contributions and initiatives (Cabotaje & Alampay, 2013), much work is needed to capture how such local efforts become implicated in the use of linguistic and multimodal resources to mobilize new meanings for the purpose of converting...
existing resources into ones of material value for the global consumer. The desire to go ‘local’, in other words, must be interrogated alongside the desire to sell the ‘local’. There has also been considerable body of work on the commodification of place/space in tourism discourse (Urry, 2005; Burns, 2006; Jaworski and Thurlow, 2010), but there is also a need to examine the range of linguistic and multimodal resources deployed to enact practices of commodification, and for this paper it is the deployment of resemiotization in the service of commodification.

This paper has two main parts. First, it introduces the Philippine tourism industry, and describes how its grassroots campaign came to be. Second, it then describes resemiotization and commodification as complementary frameworks in the analysis of the campaign ads. To do this, the paper presents three interrelated stages of analysis: identifies dominant themes in the taglines of the memes, explains how resemiotization occurs when images and taglines are analysed together, and then deploys Hunter’s (2008) typology of representation of space and subject to show how the images commodify local people, places and practices represented in the memes. Overall, the analysis interrogates the use of memes as constitutive of a participatory culture that characterizes newer forms of language use today (Ross and Rivers, 2017; Georgakopoulou, 2015; Zhu, 2016), arguing that in the case of the Philippines’ global tourism campaign, memes become implicated in the normalizing processes of commodifying the local for global consumption.

2. Contextualizing the Philippine tourism industry

The Philippine tourism industry is an integral part of the country’s economy as it contributes a large part of its GDP. Specifically, Gatdula (2014) reports that, with about 4.7 million foreigners visiting the country annually, the Philippine Tourism industry earned USD 4.4 billion in revenue. There has been a steady rise of visitors to the country from all parts of the world, but mostly from the United States and neighboring ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) countries (Lagman, 2008).

The appointment of a new secretary of tourism in 2012 led to the grassroots campaign called, “It’s more fun in the Philippines” which urged Filipinos to develop different internet ads (or memes) which showcase the country’s many tourism sites. Philippine Secretary of Tourism and one of the country’s leading advertising gurus, Ramon Reyes Jimenez Jr., calls the campaign a “people power campaign” (De Castro, 2012, p. 8) and an “instant hit” (p. 8) because of the spontaneity of the whole process. As Levine (2015) recounts, the campaign originated from David Guerrero, who previously worked on past tourism campaigns in the Philippines. The campaign, “it’s more fun in the Philippines” employed a crowdsourcing approach allowing users of social media from the country (an estimated 27 million facebook users from the Philippines) to contribute to the campaign by including photographs with the title of the caption. Launched by the Department of Tourism (DOT) through events and the office website ‘www.experiencephilippines.org’, and social network sites, the new slogan was accompanied by three sample memes for the public to model and spread through the internet. Bosangit (2014) elaborates that the campaign website included a set of guidelines (font, layout and photo quality) and even app in preparing the memes. She further that the campaign generated as much as 12,000 memes in less than a week as many Filipinos as well as celebrities abroad participated in the campaign.

Similar to Adegoju’s (2016) investigation on nation rebranding in Nigeria, the Philippines capitalized on the use of social media in e-governance as concretized by the campaign through inclusive participation of citizens in government initiatives (Cabotaje and Alampay, 2013; Aragon, 2012). This became the basis for the government’s more active marketing of the Philippine brand through grassroots participation as it tapped into other platforms of marketing such as mainstream media (e.g., CNN), international magazines, mobile advertising (campaign on fifty black cabs and twenty-five double-decker buses in London), and travel trade shows. There is ample proof that the campaign has helped boost the tourism industry, for example in terms of visitor influx to the country since 2012 (De Castro, 2012; Levine, 2015; O’Connell and Vanoverbeke, 2015), as well as added revenues from the tourism sector (De Castro, 2012; Levine, 2015; Castillo and Quinabo, 2012).

This highly effective campaign presents a fertile ground for understanding the complex relationship between language use and globalization. The campaign is essentially a profit-generating campaign meant to bolster the country’s (still) struggling economy, but the use of memes for global reach and consumption betrays critical questions about what happens to ground-level initiatives when they begin to be regulated by institutions of power and mediated by the needs and biases of global tourism consumers. In other words, the campaign memes are fertile ground for an examination of how language use and meaning – drawn from indigenous creative energies – are normalized for the global consumer. As mentioned earlier, for these memes, this is accomplished through resemiotization and commodification. In keeping with previous investigations that link language and social processes, resemiotization and commodification collude to respond to the consumerist motivations of the global market (Hunter, 2008; Papen, 2005; Georgakopoulou, 2015; Culler, 1988; Dunn, 2005). These strategies help us see how authenticity and localness are accorded material value for the purposes of consumption and profitability.

3. Theoretical framework

As a discursive strategy, Iedema (2003) defines resemiotization as a process of “how meaning making shifts from context to context, from practice to practice, or from one stage of a practice to the next” (p. 41). In other words, as meanings are transported through modalities (texts, videos, pictures or other resources) that encapsulate certain practices, they may be interpreted or translated differently in varying contexts. Mehan (1998), for example, details how a ‘special’ education student has been constructed progressively, beginning from informal talk with the teacher who then writes a referral letter recommending a particular battery of tests for the students, the results of which further formalize, reaffirm and reinterpret the student as a ‘special student’ in formal meetings. The different contexts of meaning-making – informal talk, referral letter, battery of tests, formal written report, formal meetings, and the writing of the outcome of such meetings placed in an office file – serve as platforms for the progressive resemiotization of the student as a special student. Iedema (2003) also gives as another example the emerging cross referencing of representative practices such as the inclusion of historical events in individual pages of the Dutch passport. This means that in terms of purpose, while the passport serves as a bureaucratic document, it also embodies the Netherlands’ heritage. In another investigation, Prior et al. (2006) reports a resemiotized activity borne out of ethnographic work with a comedy skit group in a high school. They observed that the development of a play came from one member’s poem and each member contributed to expanded lines, a range of gestures to accompany individual actors’ parts as well as voicing and costumes to fully articulate the theme of the original text. Overall, as Iedema (2001) emphasizes, resemiotization is a means of understanding how “the community transposes and reflexes its knowledges, techniques and technologies as well as its interpersonal, social and cultural practices and positionings” (p. 36). He
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