

IDENTITY AND IDEOLOGY: PRESS ONE FOR AMERICAN ENGLISH

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Since its debut in 2005, YouTube has evolved from a video file-sharing venue mostly used by amateur filmmakers into a site increasingly used for political campaigning and cyber-activism. Among the thousands of videos containing pet-tricks and angst-filled diaries, there are also a number of videos by professional musicians promoting their latest singles. A new offering by the duo Rivoli Revue, has been downloaded on YouTube 3,350,992 times as of Thursday, July 12th 2007, since it was added on June 8th, 2007.¹ The music video, entitled “Press One for English,” debuts at a time of increasingly vocal protests concerning nationwide English-only laws; a context inseparable from its success.

In the video, Ron and Kay Rivoli perform their country-western song, which promotes English as the only true American language. The video stands as a piece of pop-propaganda dependent on both its lyrics and visual icons to advance its ideological stance on language. Understanding its message necessitates a circumscription of the term “ideology”, defined by Rosina Lippi-Green, as the “promotion of the needs and interests of a dominant group or class at the expense of marginalized groups, by means of disinformation and misrepresentation of those non-dominant groups.”² According to Lippl-Green’s definition, the Rivoli Revue’s song represents the dominant group as exclusively English-speaking, white, American-born, middle-class at the expense of second-language speakers of English. In the video, second-language speakers are not merely misrepresented; they are not represented at all and are “othered” through this exclusion. “Press One for English” reveals a belief in standard American English, an abstraction that serves as a myth in the American grand-narrative of progress. The cultural rhetoric of the American dream reinforces the status quo. The authority of myths is centered in their “veracity is secondary to the way in which a story symbolizes human experience more generally” and they are often used to “justify social order.”³ The social order expressed in the song suggests a collective ideal of an America in which today’s immigrants are expected to assimilate by learning English, just as was “always done” by immigrants in the past. The song uses entertainment as a vehicle for nationalism—and ultimately for a type of propagandist pedagogy.

Ideology reflects our cultural and social worlds. Ideology itself is a product of language; therefore, our construction of reality depends on both the cultural aspects of language and word choice in social interactions. Ideology and language share mutual dependency; a relationship in which they serve to construct one another and ultimately shape and reflect our lived experience. Individuals participate in a cultural script mapped by traditions which uphold definitions of national identity perpetuated by cultural myths, such as the American dream. Within the American imagination, the myth of the mainstream projects the ideal of English as the legal, official national language. This belief conflates socio-historical attitudes about language with nationalistic ideology.

In response to reporter Bill Varian’s questions about the lyrics (*St. Petersburg Times*, May 15th,

¹ Rivoli Revue. *Press one for English* (2007), <http://youtube.com/watch?v=sEJfS1v-fU0>.

² Rosina Lippi-Green, *English with an accent: language, ideology, and discrimination in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 64.

³ *Ibid.*, 41.

2007), Kay Rivoli stated, "The song is not anti-immigration. It is very pro-American and pro-English". Rivoli's defence of her song answered criticism (from a city official in Hillsborough, Florida), directed towards its lyrics, after the song was performed at a local law enforcement banquet. Complaints characterized the song as unwelcoming to non-English speakers. Although the video uses exaggeration and comedy, it does not present itself as satire but rather as a straightforward social criticism. The Rivolis offer their view without ambiguity. They close off multiple interpretations and offer humour, but without irony directed at their own project. The Rivolis' and their detractors' descriptions of the video reveal competing ideologies about public opinions regarding English language use. A national debate centered on promoting the "English only movement" reveals social and cultural beliefs about language use in America, reflecting an array of competing ideologies about the relationship between language and nation.

"Press One for English" argues for assimilation through its use of visual rhetoric and lyrics. The video reinforces the music's lyrics with images of the Rivoli Revue performing in several locations, as well as images of American flags, the military, and historical photographs of immigrants in English classrooms. The song's genre, country-western music, (an indigenous American musical form) serves as an appropriate vehicle for promoting nationalistic. An image of waving flags—the Stars and Stripes and a POW flag—introduces the video before the lyrics begin: "Hey, I can't read that sign out there, please tell me, what's it say? We have to have subtitles in five languages these days." Kay Rivoli sings these words to images of her driving and performing in front of a suburban house with her husband accompanying her on guitar. Both the lyrics and the images position her as a subject who requires the assistance of the audience in order to understand street signs written in subtitles. Her point of view necessitates imagining the subtitled signs through her eyes—an unlikely scenario of glancing at and misunderstanding no fewer than five subtitled signs while driving down the highway. The street signs referenced as examples display that the English language is not the only language that is publicly represented in America. These examples reveal an aspect of the song's ideological stance. English's dominance—really the dominance of the ruling class—is threatened by other languages. Also, the song mentions both signs and speaking English, which conflates written and spoken language. In classrooms nationwide, such conflation reflects the popularly-held opinion of language, despite the evidence that no one speaks the same way that one writes. By perpetuating the idea that speech "should" reflect the same properties as writing, the video participates in yet another myth. This myth is likely the result of the grade-school experiences of thousands of us, a collective "we", whom have been taught to watch not only what we say but how we say it.

The lyrics directly invite the audience to be part of *its* "we"—a "we" that does not "ask too much to share this land of liberties" (the next line of the song). This invitation makes the assumption that the audience share's the song's ideological stance against "allowing" the presumed encroachment of other languages into the American landscape, consisting of the educational system and other institutions. The use of "we" in the line "we don't ask too much to share this land of liberties" implies that the "we" owns the liberties. The ideological position is defined by its very opposition to the "other" who immigrates to America in search of the "land of liberties". This ideological position is evidenced by the lyrics and accompanying photograph of the Statue of Liberty, an obvious symbolic representation of American freedoms.

Owning liberty is equated with speaking English. This context prepares the viewer for Kay's next request: "But, if it's not too much to ask, could you please speak English". This line softens her request for the unidentified "you" to speak English. The ambiguous use of "you" can be understood to represent

the opposition to the “we”; one who is unwilling or unable (a crucial distinction not explicated by the song) to speak English. When the lines shift to asking the unidentified “you” to speak English, the video provides the image of a black and white photograph labelled as an English class for Russian immigrants that appears to be from the early twentieth century. The still shot of the immigrant classroom is one of four such representations in the video. These images visually argue that immigrants have “traditionally” attended English class in order to assimilate into the mainstream—the white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, middle-class. Using a historical representation conflates past and present immigrants, ignoring time-dependent political and social contexts of their journey and arrival in the U.S. Moreover, the repetition of a classroom scene reveals a belief that the American educational system can “rescue” marginalized groups. Lippi-Green describes that this attitude has become commonly accepted as the “process of linguistic assimilation to an abstracted standard is cast as a natural one, necessary and positive for the greater social good.”⁴

In American entertainment such as “Press One for English,” the songwriters and performers portray themselves as authorities who decide how English should be used in this country. Furthermore, the media companies that promote such music implicitly endorse the nationalist message of the song, despite any number of disclaimers that otherwise proclaim the companies’ disassociation from their clients’ views. The very act of selling the song constitutes an act of power. The song itself does not explicitly argue for instituting English language laws, but the lyrics suggest that English should be used exclusively for public signage and businesses. The premise of the title reflects the ideal that a person should not *have* to press “one” to hear English when calling a company. Such lyrics are employed as a disciplinary measure, (according to Foucault) by demanding the control of public discourse as a means to construct cultural reality through national identity. The mythical American “standard” English creates an “other” by difference—the “foreigners” covertly referred to in the song exist in opposition to a fictional mainstream of white, middle-class English speakers Americans. The individuals that are members of this mainstream society are imagined characters in the song’s plot; sons and daughters of past immigrants who assimilated and did not expect (so the imaginary narrative goes) to retain their original culture and language. The “assimilated” individuals did not expect multi-lingual menus on road signs and automated telephone systems, which is contrasted with the song’s belief that present-day immigrants would prefer to have these language options. English, in the American national story, is the “one and only possible language of a unified and healthy nation”.⁵

Such linguistic control over “American-ness” limits national identity to one particular variety of standard English, supposedly free of accent. The song must be heard to discern Kay Rivoli’s pronunciation of the word “English”. When she sings, “If it’s not too much to ask, could you please speak English”, she sings “Eng-leesh.” The pronunciation cannot be attributed to a specific accent, however; it is meant to be non-American stereotype without a specific referent beyond an “other” known by accent alone. As such, the one “mispronounced” word in the song represents a system of stereotyping akin to Lippi-Green’s description of accent use by actors as a “shortcut to characterization”.⁶ An entire social world of discrimination is evoked; a power imbalance directly related to the unwillingness of the ruling classes to

⁴ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 217.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 81.

lessen the communication gap.

The chorus reinforces discrimination through repetition. The first time the chorus is sung, Kay and Ron perform in front of a suburban home. Again, her subjectivity serves as a representative of the assumed subjectivity of the audience. Kay identifies English as something she, the United States, and possibly even suburbia itself, owns: “English is my language. It’s the language of this land. And every sign that’s posted here, I should understand”. The lyrics frame public signs as something that “should” be accessible to her. This admission signals Kay’s belief that it is her right (and expectation) that the signs “ought” to be in English only. The usage of *should* and *ought* reveal a moral dimension to the ideological belief, adding a contextual layer of nationalist rhetoric that equates morality with the English-only ideological stance. The next lines re-emphasize this notion by adding a geographical context defined in opposition to the “others” of countries that are *not* the United States: “I do not live in China, Mexico, no foreign place, and English is the language of these United States.” As Kay sings these lines, an image of a field of waving flags is followed by saluting Marines, powerful images of American iconography that reinforce the country’s dominance.

What is left unsaid—or unsung—is the assumption that the American military embodies values consistent with English-only laws; their power rests not only in military fortitude, but also in history. Kay sings the second verse—“Now I’ll speak very clear for you so there’ll be no mistake: my family fought and died protecting freedoms in these states”—reinforcing her patriotism and establishing her authority through familial connections to past and present wars. American English functions as a metonymic concept, by which the idea of American-ness is reduced to the act of speaking the English language. As Lakoff and Johnson argue, metonymic concepts “allow us to conceptualize one thing by means of its relation to something else”.⁷ When the chorus of “Press One” argues that English is the “language of this land,” it implies that the land and its citizens have ownership over the language. America and its citizens, by this equation, *become* the mythical standard English itself. This standard becomes an entity worth fighting for. By extension, American English is framed as a right established in the past; a right solidified in a national covenant signed in blood shed on battlefields here and abroad. The subtext suggests that the right to be an American has already been earned by those who live here—and speak English—and that immigrants should respect that right by speaking English as well. Regarding the English language as an earned right signifies its role as symbolic capital, which is used to identify what it means to be American, as well as to control that identity. While she sings the lines, images of her father, father-in-law, brother, and uncle, flash on the screen in black-and-white vintage photographs (except for the color photograph of her brother), which carries the military representation into the present era. The lyrics argue, “Now we all welcome those who come, but when you reach our shores, folks, you should speak our language, not the one you spoke before,” a prescriptive admonition to the “other”, marginalized “you”; that “you” must completely shoulder the communicative burden.

After the second chorus, the song has an instrumental section, during which the video shows a black and white photograph of a crowd scene that appears to be a political rally from the first half of the twentieth century. The power of this scene lies in its ability to invoke history as a source of authority as the following words scroll in the foreground:

⁷ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors we live by* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 39.

“We have room but for one flag, the American flag. We have room for but one language here, and that is the English language...and we have room but for one sole loyalty and that is a loyalty to the American people. —Theodore Roosevelt, 1907”.

The words emphasize the authority of a president and the past itself. This historical context positions the ideological stance of English-only laws as heirs to American values established by “our” forefathers and mothers.

The next section of the song pronounces a belief in nationalism, the American democratic ideal, and an open door policy: “Now, I’m proud of our country, and this great democracy, and I believe an open door should be our policy”. The subsequent line, however, demands a payment for the open door, a bartering system that inadvertently reveals an ironic antithesis to the concept of freedom: “But for these opportunities, we’d simply ask you this, hey, you’re the one who chose to come, now choose to speak English”. The lyrics reveal a belief that a person can choose to speak English and forgo one’s first language instantaneously, as though a person’s first language threatens their loyalty to America. The lived reality of immigrants is simplified, even as the lyrics reveal ambivalence and conflict within the values the song purports. The lyrics dictate that people should have the freedom to choose to come to the US, but once here, their freedoms must be curtailed. The lyrics’ contradictory stance aligns itself with Terry Eagleton’s argument that a “successful ruling ideology...must engage significantly with genuine wants, needs, and desires; but this is also its Achilles heel, forcing it to recognize an ‘other’ to itself and inscribing this otherness as a potentially disruptive force within its own forms”.⁸ Eagleton’s recognition of the paradoxical nature of ideology reflects the inherent paradox of the American dream promoted by the song. The lyrics and video prescribe assimilation as a desirable achievement at the cost of losing one’s existing cultural or linguistic identity.

The video’s final scene reinforces the ideology that the marginalized group is attempting to “take over” the mainstream in a power grab symbolized by such insidious examples as a mundane voice-recording menu. The “other” infiltrates everything from road signs with subtitles to the cable company’s automated voice commands. The chorus repeats several times as the number of American flags on the screen increase. One flag in particular references an aspect of the author’s ideological stance that is not addressed in the lyrics; the sun shines through a flag flying above a parking lot and beams through the field of blue on the flag in the shape of a Christian cross. Visually, the English-only ideological stance derives tacit authority from the Christian God, whose inclusion reinforces the aforementioned sovereignty of the Stars and Stripes, the military, history, and family. After the repetition of the chorus, the song culminates in its titular line: “Now here’s one thing I question, then try to understand. Why must I press one for English... [electronic voice: Thank you for calling: Please press one for English]...when it’s the language of this land”. The accompanying images show a frustrated Kay on a phone working her way through an electronic menu in a deliberately comedic scene that relies upon the audience’s identification with her anger and confusion.

The argumentative lyrics make claim their ownership of the English language by use of repetition of the chorus, and much more subtly, through specific metaphors. For example, ontological metaphors help to solidify abstractions, allowing people to identify, categorize, and reason about experience. One type of

⁸ Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An introduction* (New York: Verso, 1991), 45.

ontological metaphor helps to describe an entity by what Lakoff and Johnson label “identifying aspects”, which are often not noticed as being metaphorical.⁹ These types of metaphors distinguish features of an entity, often using personification, as in the clause “freedom of expression maintains peace”. “Freedom of expression” is an ontological metaphor classifiable as an “identifying aspect”. The metaphor represents “expression” as possessing “freedom,” a subtle nuance that helps us identify an aspect of what expression actually means. In the “Press One” song, three such metaphors perpetuate nationalistic ideology: *land of liberty*, *no foreign place*, and *open door*. These metaphors characterize America as a refuge, but one that is bound by its difference from other “foreign places”. America functions as a container demarcated by its own shores, which mark a transitional space where a newcomer is expected to cast off other languages. The second verse of the song cautions, “Now we all welcome those who come, but when you reach our shores, folks, you should speak our language, not the one you spoke before”. The *open door* concept harbours a paradox—the door just might close on the person passing through it if she or he does not assimilate, according to the threat embodied in the lyrics.

Specifically, the lyrics explain that the songwriters believe in an open door policy of immigration, but they require that immigrants learn English as part of an unwritten agreement to “share this land of liberty”. Simply stated, the lyrics promote freedom, but only within the prescribed limits of the language ideology held by the songwriters, their fans, and promoters of the English only movement. Macedo defines the “English only” movement as a form of colonialism that erases cultural diversity.¹⁰ Underlying the lyrics is a perceived threat to American unity; a belief that the public display of other languages will weaken national identity and possibly even promote anarchy. Such xenophobia plays into a racially tinged mythology at odds with America’s idealized historical symbolism as the “saviour” of the world. Schildkraut argues that the “mass public” understands America as nation of immigrants; a view of national identity that serves as a “wide-ranging civic myth that ... contains internal contradictions. It celebrates ethnic diversity and praises maintaining cultural traditions while also supporting assimilation and the emergence of new, uniquely American traditions”.¹¹ Again, a paradox emerges, much like that inherent in the American dream, wherein American identity simultaneously encourages individuality and assimilation, independence and dependence, difference and sameness.

In the formation of the American identity, language ideology remains central to cultural authority and dominance. Terry Eagleton explains that ideologies are “often thought to lend coherence to the groups or classes which hold them, welding them into a unitary, if internally differentiated, identity, and perhaps thereby allowing them to impose a certain unity upon society as a whole”.¹² In America, such power impositions are reinforced by members of the dominant socioeconomic class as part of the use of language in the creation of American identity through ethnocultural practices. Schildkraut defines “ethnoculturalism” as the “belief that certain ascriptive or immutable characteristics delineate American identity. More specifically, it is the belief that Americans are white English-speaking Protestants of

⁹ Lakoff and Johnson, 27.

¹⁰ Donaldo Macedo, “The colonialism of the English only movement,” *Educational researcher* 29,3 (2000).

¹¹ Deborah J. Schildkraut, “American identity and attitudes toward official-English policies,” *Political psychology* 24,3 (2003), 493.

¹² Terry Eagleton. *Ideology: An introduction* (New York: Verso, 1991),45.

northern European ancestry".¹³ According to Schildkraut's definition, "Press One for English" implicitly promotes ethnoculturalism as part of the "us versus them" scenario outlined by the lyrics. For the "them" (in the song) to become part of the "us" immigrants must learn English, meaning that newcomers can supposedly have their "language problem" solved by education.

Offering education as an antidote to presumed language ills delivers a false promise of levelling social inequalities stemming from ethnicity or language use. Lippi-Green summarizes the role of institutionalized language ideology in schools insists "that some children forego the expressive power of consolation and speech in that variety of English which is the currency of their home communities". She identifies the practices as a "gesture of denial and symbolic subordination" that is "projected as a first and necessary step to becoming a good student and a good citizen".¹⁴ The final verse of "Press One for English" grossly oversimplifies the process required for English as a second language learners: "But for these opportunities we'd simply ask you this, hey you're the one who chose to come, now choose to speak English". The request assumes not only that Kay Rivoli operates as a spokesperson for ethnoculturalism, but that "choosing" to speak English is a simple task. Moreover, the responsibility of learning is thrust wholly on the individual.

Stewart and Bennett discuss problem-solving and self-reliance as two American values in *American Cultural Patterns*. These values are driven by the Protestant work ethic, "Americans have seen failure as a lack of will and effort on the part of the individual". They believe that the "conditions of one's birth are considered circumstantial and can be overcome by the self-reliant individual".¹⁵ As part of the grand-narrative of the American dream, self-reliance expresses national identity and becomes part of a civic story that expects linguistic assimilation. Our popular media (including television and now YouTube), reinforces American narratives and cultural practices of the dominant classes. Entertainment, particularly television, can place the audience in the role of spectator, rather than the role of activist. Terry Eagleton argues that "[w]hat is politically important about television is probably less its ideological content than the act of watching it. Watching television for long stretches confirms individuals in passive, isolated, privatized roles, and [is] more a form of social control than an ideological apparatus".¹⁶ However, YouTube can serve as an ideological apparatus in a way television cannot. A person sitting at a computer must take an active role in choosing what to watch on the site. Often, people visit YouTube through email links sent to them by friends or relatives; an activity that shifts YouTube from the "privatized role" of television into a more public space. With its attendant advertising and concern with corporate revenue, YouTube as a public space ultimately promotes a consumerist ideology. After the final bars of music, two remaining images flash on the screen. One exclaims, "Buy the Single! Buy the Video!" and the other advertises the Rivoli Revue web site. After promoting the ideological English-only stance, the video reveals itself as a sales-tool for the duo's single. The message is, "Buy this record and video and promote our belief that English should be the only language in the United States". At the end of the video, its context shifts to a mixing of linguistic and consumerist ideology. This consumerist underpinning attaches

¹³ Schildkraut, 474.

¹⁴ Lippi-Green, 132.

¹⁵ Edward C. Stewart and Milton C. Bennett, *American cultural patterns: A cross-cultural perspective* (Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press Inc., 1991), 82, 122.

¹⁶ Eagleton, 34-35.

itself to the video's message; it is a sales pitch that masquerades as an activist tool. A consumer could (literally and metaphorically), buy the ideology of the video. One could select "Press One for English" or simply press "delete." The American cultural script drives the primacy of mainstream English in the American imagination. The past, present, and future are framed as part of the ongoing story of language in America, a mythology entrenched in ideology and identity.

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