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## Youth Culture in the United States : Some Implications for TEFL

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### Abstract

This article draws attention to the social changes that have occurred recently in the United States. In particular it is suggested that today's high school and college students have developed a youth culture in strong opposition to the views, values and beliefs of their parents and grandparents. This youth culture has a linguistic significance. As the world contracts into "a Global Village" this language shift will become familiar to and popular with young overseas students of English. We should prepare ourselves for new forms of English in textbooks.

Ajarn Mayuri Sukwiwat's distinguished career has taken her to many countries as a representative of Thailand at international conferences. It is not, therefore, surprising that the cultural and linguistic differences she met should have impressed her or that she became sharply aware of the importance of culture in Language Learning. Her period as a professor at the East-West Centre in Hawaii has enabled her to deepen this personal interest into an academic one. Together with John Fieg some of the results of their joint interest in this important area have begun to bear fruit in PASAA and in several chapters of a forthcoming book.

The word "culture" is notoriously difficult to define. At its widest it covers "social organization, role relationships, values and beliefs, and other shared patterns of knowledge and behavior, which are transmitted from generation to generation in the process of socialization/enculturation". (Saville-Troike, 1982) and at its narrowest

such apparently simple behavioral forms as Greeting and Leave-Taking (Sukwiwat and Fieg, 1987). But at all points language is at once the usual means of acquiring and realising the cultural norms in action. Cultures are, of course, social in nature--we should not need language if there was no one to communicate and interact with--and we all of us occupy many varied relations to other members of our culture: as subordinate, superior, parent, child, sibling, peer, citizen, subject and so on. These relationships have meanings within each culture, as well as varying slightly from one culture to another. The particular meanings they have are reflected in the particular and varied uses we make of the appropriate language cum gestural forms; what is correct in one culture often being inappropriate in another. As M.A.K. Halliday puts it:

A social system, primitive or developed, is itself a system of meaning relations which incorporates a culture of the

society. It is encoded and realised for the most part (but not exclusively) in the language of the society, which is the normal channel for the maintenance and transmission of the system. The meaning potential of the language is its lexical, syntactical and sound system. (Halliday, 1975).

In what follows I want to consider a sub-culture of the United States, (and to some extent of Britain), and to make some comments on the language use related to it. The sub-culture in question is that of the young, 15-25 years of age, and thus of the same age as the majority of English language-learners elsewhere.

Since the end of the Second World War, the United States has been the dominant cultural influence internationally. Millions of foreign students have studied there and thousands of American professors and others have worked in countries throughout the world, under a variety of aid schemes. Architectural styles, supermarkets, refrigerators and washing machines, computers, jumbo-jet aircraft, jeans and tee-shirts and--via film and television--the music, dance and customs of the United States have become as familiar to people living in Asia as they are to those in Europe. The cultural influence of the US on the youth of the world has been deep and lasting. What city of any size anywhere in the world has not its McDonalds, its Kentucky Fried Chicken, its Pizza Parlour and its Disco?

One of the important cultural movements in the USA that derived increasing strength following World War II, was the Women's Liberation Movement. The "Liberation" asw from male dominance and the

uncritical view that "woman's place is in the home". The assumption that after marriage a woman's role was that of bearing and rearing children, buying and cooking food, washing and cleaning and generally occupying her day in a series of physically and exhausting activities, with little or no intellectual stimulus, whilst readily accepting its inferiority to the more important activity of her husband at the office or factory. This old-fashioned opinion came under intense public criticism. Girls who did as well as, or better than, their male counterparts at school and college, rebelled against the imposition of what they thought of as a limiting and demeaning role. They were helped in their campaign by a sympathetic shift of opinion among the educated at large and by three new developments in America.

The first of these, the contraceptive pill, meant that married couples could plan the arrival of their children, and consequently that girls could plan their working careers over a longer period. The second, was that with two earners, there came about an explosion of available financial credit--the credit card. The third was that new developments in technology, allied to the availability of purchasing power, led to cheap time and labour-saving devices becoming widely available for most of the housewife's chores. In supermarkets ready-to-cook food, improved in choice and quality, and the invention of the microwave oven meant that a meal could be served in minutes. Given the demand and the finance as a stimulus, the capitalist economies of the world have developed products which have increased the earning power and standards of living of the western middle classes to a hitherto unimaginable degree. Some people have seen a similar stirring in Japan.

The Women's Liberation Movement has had its influence on the language. English was shown to be "sexist" in the sense that the christian god was referred to as 'he' and 'father', that married women had to take the name of their husbands and that the human population at large is referred to in English as 'mankind'. Why, it was asked, were doctors always referred to as 'he' and nurses as 'she' when persons of both sexes functioned in these occupations? At first such complaints were treated as a joke or nuisance, the product of a few fanatical members of a feminist lobby. Men vied with one another in producing absurd examples whereby the word 'man' (as in 'chairman') was replaced by 'person' or the masculine pronoun by the feminine. Thus one heard the absurd suggestion made that the city of Manchester should be renamed Personchester, or History replaced by Herstory etc.

Gradually it came to be seen as a reflection of genuine social change. As women (some now spelt it "wimmin" and preferred the neutral term Miz, spelt Ms, to Miss or Mrs) performed more and more of the tasks previously performed by men it was clearly a misnomer to refer to the performers of these tasks as postmen, airmen, workmen etc. The youth culture of today takes these changes for granted and such usage as chairperson has become standard among those young women who use the word.

There has, of course, been a price to pay for these changes, other than that marked on the tags in the shops. Seeking cheaper labour, factories have been sited in Third World countries with scarcely any regulation of their activities. The con-

sequences have been severe. Industrial pollution, the overintensive exploitation of irreplaceable natural resources, such as the rain forests of South East Asia and Brazil, and the serious disturbance of settled rural cultures. Rapacity and greed, under the guise of progress and industrial development, have had their customary malign effects. The rise of the youth-supported environmental protection movement (the Greens) has been rapid and their political influence surprising.

The children of the American generation I have been considering are the contemporaries of our own students. It is their outlook and beliefs, together with the associated language that I want to consider. Our own school and university students, influenced still by the youth culture of the U.S.A., will want to master their idioms and language forms as part of their English language programme. Though the home culture of the one is different from that of the other the language is a bridge between the two. As teachers we are faced with the not unimportant decision of what forms to include in our syllabuses. The old standard educated English and Received Pronunciation (RP), or standard American pronunciation seem to me to be facing challenges from a spreading "sub-standard" form. An example of what I mean can be given in the comment of John MacEnroe, the tennis champion, which is frequently repeated by his tennis fraternity and other sportsmen, "I did real good out there today" meaning "I played really well on the tennis court today." One does not have to look far to come across other examples in which adverbs and adjectives are reversed. (It hurts bad. I sure will.)

What seems to be happening is that the youth of America (and Europe) have reacted against the materialistic culture of their parents, as well as against the authority of their society. The respect that most Asians feel for higher education and the opportunities which it presents for professional and material advancement, is not equalled in the West. To be young and ambitious is to attract the term Yup (Young Upwardly-mobile People) now used scornfully as a derogatory term (Yuppie). Today's students view success in the business and technical fields without much admiration. They will commonly take a year off from university to travel the world but chiefly Asia--and to obtain some acquaintance with other students and the poorer inhabitants of Asian countries at firsthand. They travel very cheaply, carrying all they need in a knapsack (hence the term "backpacker" by which they are known) and frequently in twos and threes of both sexes.

Instead of identifying with parental or grandparental social aims and values the western student, particularly the North American, identifies with the economically, the politically and the socially underprivileged. Thus the approved form of clothing is one which looks as much like a vagrant's rags as is decent. Jeans have their colour pulverized out and fringes, or a tear below the knee, put in. Rejecting their own comfortable homes, many students elect to live together in some sort of communal life. Ignoring private property, they will break into and occupy an empty house (a "squat" and resist being ejected. Their diet is largely junk-food.

Despite this vagrant-like appearance students keep themselves clean, and are

particularly fastidious about their hair. Indeed hair plays a very important part in youth culture. The "dreadlocks" of the Jamaican Rastafarian cult are imitated, unlikely dyes are applied, men wear bull-fighter queues or longer plaits. Girls, taking the Women's Liberation Movement for granted, dress in the same fashions as the boys, cut their hair short and generally, in language, and appearance justify the term "unisex"--an undifferentiation of male and female in clothes, habits, views and values.

The rejection of conservative values and authority gives a slightly criminal aspect to the youth culture. While it is unlikely that college students are addicted to "hard" drugs to any significant extent, there can be little doubt that the great majority have experimented with marijuana and, indeed, that many are regular users. To some extent this derives from another major influence on youth culture: music.

There can be no greater "Chinese Wall" between generations than the popular music each enjoys. Today's youth prefers music that is heavily rhythmic, very loudly amplified, unmelodic and very repetitive. Songs tend either to reduce their lyrics to one or two lines or to take the form of protests of one kind or another. The guitar is the almost universally popular instrument (but slowly giving way to the saxophone) and permits the competent practitioner to sing well-known folk songs and to compose individual ones. These two forms of music, the loud rhythmic amplified kind and the individually performed folk song reflect youth culture clearly. The loud rock music associates with the drug-taking culture of the musicians who perform it. The disco, with its disorienting strobe lights and its

extremely amplified sound, tends to produce in the dancers a trance-like unawareness of anything external to the immediate environment. As with drugs, habitués become "spaced-out", "high", "far out" -- terms suggesting temporary unbalancing of normal perception. The quieter folk music expresses the perennial aspirations of youth for a juster world and romantic love.

The language of the young differentiates itself most obviously from the older generation in the most ephemeral of all linguistic forms: slang. An article in the *International Herald Tribune* (Bernstein, 1988) illustrates some of the shifts in grammatical category associated with the new English. The word "happening" which Bernstein suggests is derived from black street-talk (as in "what's happening man?", i.e. what's the news?) now means whatever is fashionable and approved. Together with this change in meaning goes the grammatical shift from, first, verb to noun, and then from noun to adjective, as in "He's a happening guy."

The parents of today's youth used the slang word "groovy" to mean up-to-date and exciting. Today it means old-fashioned and boring. "Random" means something lacking sense or any kind of predictable logic. A young person commenting on the seemingly inexplicable behaviour of another will refer to it by saying "He's totally random." There is little point in listing some of today's student slang for its own sake. But the citations I have made suggest support for two aspects of the youth culture I have already mentioned, viz the assimilation of black English and the rejection of parental norms. This is unsurprising and as one would expect. Youth traditionally asserts itself by rejecting, at least initially,

the ways of its elders. More interest attaches to the choice of "random" a word which has increased in use with the arrival of a generation skilled in the use of a computer from school-age onwards. (PC is also slang but means politically correct).

The development of high technology and the advent of a generation of young Americans and Europeans for whom computers are as familiar as typewriters were to their parents, carry further linguistic implications. The computer scientists of California's "Silicon Valley", where the latest inventions and developments are taking place, are themselves young. They are conscious of being the first or second generation of a completely new and revolutionary industry which is changing the way we live. As with any other group of people engaged in specialised work they have developed their own jargon for professional communication. They have also developed idioms and slang current in everyday use. Some of these are seeping into more general use among the pace-setting student youth of California. The excellent B.B.C. television series *The Story of English*, based on Robert McCrum's book, illustrates these developments with copious examples.

What I have been drawing attention to may seem far removed from the TEFL concerns of Thai teachers. For the majority this may still be the case. But as more and more classes adopt computers (every primary school in Britain has been using them for some years); as the popular music and spread of cable T.V. so much--now a part of the cultural life of educated youth around the world--begin to mirror the language and culture, generalised and filtered,

to be sure; as the old gives way to the new, then the language forms will have to be taken into account. At the least we can expect an increasing reflection of these sociolinguistic changes in the textbooks now being or soon to be, planned and written.

### The Author

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