

'I Speak English and French, NOT American': Canadian Advertising from an Intercultural and Postcolonial Perspective

Erhard Lick*

ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present paper was to explore the famous Canadian Molson beer TV commercial from both an intercultural and postcolonial perspective. This commercial, also referred to as 'the Rant', was selected because of the significant role it has played for the creation of Canadian identity since the mid-1990s. For this purpose, the method of critical discourse analysis was applied. The analysis revealed that, besides showing the cultural, political, and linguistic differences between Canada and the US, it mentions Canada's Inuit and Francophones only implicitly, i.e. it uses the discursive strategy of 'backgrounding'. In addition, it omits immigrant groups and Indian peoples. This strategy is referred to as 'suppression'. Thus, 'the Rant' primarily addresses Canadians of Anglo-Saxon ancestry.

Keywords: Advertising, Canada, Critical Discourse Analysis, Cultural Studies, Post-Colonialism

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1960s, Canada's province of Quebec has been demanding a stronger position within Canada (Bélanger, 1999), which even resulted in Quebec holding two referenda on its sovereignty, the first one in 1980 and the second one in 1995. Both referenda failed, with the second one only by an extremely narrow margin; 50.6% voted against and 49.4% voted in favour of Quebec's independence of Canada (Le Directeur Général des Élections du Québec, 2011).

Nevertheless, in 1969 the Official Languages Act of 1969, and its amended version of 1988, was adopted (Department of Justice Canada: "Official Languages Act", 2011), which stipulated English and French as Canada's two official languages, both enjoying an equal status (Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, 2011). These two language groups are usually named 'Canada's two founding nations' (Olek, 2011). Moreover, in 1977 the *Charte de la langue française* was enacted by the Quebec government which made French the official language of Quebec in education, the judicial system, business, etc. (Bélanger, 1998).

Furthermore, the awareness of Canada's Aboriginal peoples, i.e. First Nations, has recently risen substantially (Assembly of First Nations, 2011). In particular, the Canadian Multiculturalism Act (Department of Justice Canada: "Canadian Multiculturalism Act", 2011) of 1988 rules that Canada "is committed to a policy of multiculturalism designed to preserve and enhance the multicultural heritage of Canadians". This policy of fostering multiculturalism also applies to the different immigrant groups.

Besides, first, the conflicts between English Canada and Quebec, which derive from the historical development of the country, and, second, the recently officially recognised cultural contributions of Canada's First Nations and immigrants, Canada has tried to protect itself from both the political and cultural influences of the US. For example, referring to cultural products, former Heritage Minister Sheila Copps (1999: 41) demands from the Canadian government to intervene and protect Canadian culture against the cultural influences of the US. She argues that "[c]ompetition is necessary to nurture creativity and diversity, but it must be competition and not domination". Similarly, Feldthusen (1993) suggests

* Professor, Marketing and Communications, ESCE International Business School Paris, France.
Email: erhard.lick@esce.fr

various ways of regulating Canadian TV to protect it from the influence of its big neighbour to the south. In addition, Feldman (1993) states how Canadian cinema has been dominated by the US film industry and mentions how Canadian filmmakers may counteract this situation. Ostry (1993: 39) even calls for ‘cultural sovereignty’. His utterance, “We need a GAIET, a General Agreement on Information and Entertainment Trade, to walk through freely and proudly” illustrates how the issue of Canadian identity stirs emotions (Ostry, 1993: 41).

PURPOSE, RATIONALE, AND METHOD APPLIED

In view of the different groups of Canadian society and the particular issues of identity involved, as pointed out above, the Canadian Molson beer commercial, generally referred to as ‘the Rant’, was chosen for, first, its outstanding popularity in Canada and, second, the importance for the creation of Canadian identity it has had since the mid-1990s. Furthermore, the aim of this qualitative study was to analyse ‘the Rant’ from both an intercultural and postcolonial perspective. For this purpose, the method of critical discourse analysis was applied.

In general, Fairclough views discourse in terms of social practice. He strongly supports a transdisciplinary approach in developing a theory of discourse and methods of text analysis. For example, he argues that social theory and research may be integrated “to analyze texts as elements of social processes” (Fairclough, 2003: 6). Van Leeuwen (1995 and 1996), in particular, has developed text analysis further by employing this transdisciplinary approach (Fairclough, 2003: 6).

In particular, according to Fairclough (2003: 8), texts are “elements of social events”. They may not simply have educational effects or an impact on our beliefs and values but they may also have direct repercussions. An example would be the effects advertising may have on consumers’ identities.

Moreover, Johansen and Larsen (2002: 128) argue that “interpretation always involves a contextualization”. This means that in order to come up with an interpretation of a particular text we have to take the context into consideration in its broadest sense. For Fairclough (2003: 16-17), the contextualisation process involves the concept of ‘intertextuality’, which he defines as “how texts draw

upon, incorporate, recontextualize and dialogue with other texts” (original emphasis). Allen (2000: 209) gives a comprehensive overview of the different theories of intertextuality and he concludes,

“intertextuality reminds us that all texts are potentially plural, reversible, open to the reader’s own presuppositions, lacking in clear and defined boundaries, and always involved in the expression or repression of the dialogic ‘voices’ which exist within society”.

In addition, Beasley and Danesi (2002: 110) argue that “intertextuality links the ad to the meaning networks in a culture”. Or, in semiotic terms, analysis which includes intertextuality “can disclose the interplay of signs and cultural values at work within one text” (Thwaites, Lloyd, & Mules, 2002: 96). Hence, the decoding of subtexts requires knowledge of the cultural context. Proctor, Proctor, and Papasolomou-Doukakis (2002: 34) argue along the same lines and hold that

“[w]hen a text is read it is placed, consciously or unconsciously, in wider frames of reference of language and knowledge, cross-fertilising a particular reading with other discourses drawn from the reader’s own socially, culturally and historically situated experiences”.

Referring to recipients of advertisements who share specific cultural traits, we can adopt the notion of ‘interpretive communities’, a term which has been coined by Fish (1980: 171-172) in relation to literary criticism. Fish defines interpretative communities as communities who adopt the same interpretive strategies. These strategies already exist before reading the text, are learned, and result in invariant interpretations among different recipients.

Nevertheless, at the same time, advertisers also “model the identities and values of consumer society” (van Leeuwen, 2005: 149), that is, they use their knowledge of culture in order to shape the types of meanings an advertisement may elicit. In this sense, advertisements can be considered a means of constructing identity. Hence, both the encoding and decoding processes are contingent on the cultural context. In other words, a text, or particularly an advertisement, “can be understood only in the fuller symbolic and cultural context in which both those who produce and those who ‘read’ it exist”

(Vipond, 2000: 94). Lugin (2006: 79) speaks of 'préconstruits culturels' (cultural pre-constructions), or 'matrices culturelles' (cultural matrices), such as the collective memory of a nation or a group, which create a filter between the world and the particular communicative situation. Let us, first of all, take a look at both the text of the Molson beer commercial and its background.

MOLSON'S 'I AM CANADIAN' ADVERTISING CAMPAIGN ('THE RANT')

In 1994, Molson (MolsonCoors, 2011) launched its 'I am Canadian' advertising campaign reaching its peak in March 2000 with its famous 'Rant' commercial aired on national TV and in movie theatres. In 2004, Molson, which has been a cultural symbol of Canada since the 1980s, merged with the American brewer Coors and created the

Here is the full text (I Am Canadian, eh?!, 2011; Bégin, 2003: 177-178):

(clears throat)

Hey.

I'm not a lumberjack,

or a fur trader...

and I don't live in an igloo

or eat blubber, or own a dog sled...

and I don't know Jimmy, Sally or Suzie from Canada,

although I'm certain they're really, really nice.

I have a Prime Minister,

not a President.

I speak English and French,

NOT American.

and I pronounce it ABOUT,

NOT A BOOT.

I can proudly sew my country's flag on my backpack.

I believe in peace keeping, NOT policing.

Molson Coors Brewing Company (CBC News, 2011). In addition, Molson Coors, whose prime product is named Canadian (MolsonCoors 'Molson Canadian', 2011), is an important sponsor of events, like that of Hockey Night in Canada.

In 'the Rant' Joe Canadian, wearing jeans and a lumberjack shirt, comes onto the stage and starts his monologue. Joe Canadian quite bluntly points out the differences between Canada and the US in their political system, foreign policy, reputation abroad, language, etc. While his monologue is leading to a crescendo and his shyness is turning into self-confidence his text is being illustrated by pictures shown on a large screen behind him. 'The Rant' culminates in his statement, 'I am Canadian!'. Then he mumbles 'thank you' and meekly walks off the stage (Sugars, 2006: 125).

DIVERSITY, NOT assimilation,
 AND THAT THE BEAVER IS A TRULY PROUD AND NOBLE ANIMAL.
 A TOQUE IS A HAT,
 A CHESTERFIELD IS A COUCH,
 AND IT IS PRONOUNCED 'ZED', NOT 'ZEE', 'ZED'!

CANADA IS THE SECOND LARGEST LANDMASS!
 THE FIRST NATION OF HOCKEY!
 AND THE BEST PART OF NORTH AMERICA!
 MY NAME IS JOE!
 AND I AM CANADIAN!

Thank you.

While Joe shouts "And I am Canadian!" a glass of beer is shown in a close-up and beer is poured into the glass. At the same time, the words "I", "AM.", "Canadian" quickly pop up consecutively, with the word "Canadian" resembling the logo of the beer 'Canadian'. Here, the commercial reveals, for the first time, that it actually advertises beer. In the following, 'the Rant' is analysed from both an intercultural and postcolonial angle.

'THE RANT' FROM AN INTERCULTURAL AND POSTCOLONIAL PERSPECTIVE

In her analysis of 'the Rant', Sugars (2006: 125-126) argues, from a postcolonial point of view, that

"by marketing a certain narrative of Canadian postcolonial identity and by dramatizing a central conflict within postcolonial expression more generally, Molson's was able to tap into the conflicted nationalist subtext that informs Canadian culture and identity".

To put it differently, 'the Rant' represents an example of Canadian expression in the light of American cultural imperialism. Moreover, it makes fun of national stereotypes and applies "the celebrated mode of Canadian self-deprecating irony" (Sugars, 2006: 126). Goddard (2000) phrased his ironic comment on Joe's Rant as "[t]his

guy's in severe denial. He must be one of us". Generally, Rasporich (2006: 53) contends that "humour is so deeply rooted in cultural values, attitudes, and realities, it can be a highly effective means of myth-making".

Nevertheless, it is remarkable that 'the Rant' addresses only a specific segment of the Canadian population. It redlines Canada's Inuit peoples by having Joe Canadian disclaim that he lives in an igloo or eats whale blubber. In addition, Joe represents the typical white and male settler in Canadian history, and, thus, is placed in the context of European conquest and colonialism. The soundtrack to the speech is Sir Edward Elgar's stirring pomp and circumstances march entitled *Land of Hope and Glory*. This anthem of British imperialism clearly refers to Canada's colonial history, and it is rising as the speech becomes increasingly emotional.

'The Rant' also excludes many immigrant groups who have recently come to Canada and whose native tongues are different from English and French. First, Joe asserts that he speaks both English and French as his mother tongue. Second, he also mentions that he does not know Jimmy, Sally, or Suzie personally, but that he is convinced that they are likeable; all three names are obviously Anglo-Saxon names.

Although referring to French Canada implicitly, as mentioned above, 'the Rant' could not be run in Quebec

for nationalist reasons (Sugars, 2006: 126). Jaimet (2000) noted that “[t]he ad will show across Canada, except in Quebec, where apparently the ‘Je suis Canadien’ slogan wouldn’t go down too smoothly with beer drinkers”. Diekmeyer (2000) reports that, in general, Quebec advertising agencies do not really recommend using Canadian symbols when advertising products in Quebec since Québécois perceive themselves as a distinct society. It is also advantageous to deploy local talents. For example, for more than ten years, advertising campaigns for Pepsi Co. have featured Quebec actor Claude Meunier, who has played various crazy characters. This might be the reason why Quebec is one of the few places in the world where Pepsi outsells Coke.

Hence, ‘the Rant’ addresses predominantly Anglo-Saxon Canadians and excludes other ethnic and language groups which also form Canada. This exclusion takes two different forms. In general, van Leeuwen (2008: 29) distinguishes between two types of exclusion in discourse, that is, ‘backgrounding’ and ‘suppression’. In the case of ‘backgrounding’, social actors are not mentioned but can be inferred from the context with reasonable certainty. In contrast, ‘suppression’ is more extreme in that social actors are not only omitted but cannot even be inferred from the context of the advertisement. ‘The Rant’ makes use of both ‘backgrounding’ and ‘suppression’. Although the advertisement uses the lexeme ‘diversity’, which clearly points to Canada’s multicultural society, there is a difference in how it treats the excluded social actors in this society. Firstly, ‘the Rant’ pushes Inuit and francophone Canadians to the background by mentioning them only implicitly. To put it differently, these two groups are not mentioned explicitly, but can be only inferred from the context of the advertisement. Secondly, it suppresses immigrant groups and Indian peoples in that there is no mention of them at all and one cannot even infer their existence through the commercial.

‘The Rant’ made a big splash in Canada since it inspired imitation and quotation across the country (Sugars, 2006: 127). Many parodies were put on circulation, examples of which are ‘I am Albertan’, ‘I am Québécois’, or ‘I am Saskatchewan’ (Molson Canadian ‘Rant’ Parody, 2011; Sugars, 2006: 140). These parodies represent a phenomenon which Cook (2001: 193-194) refers to as “intra-generic intertextuality”. Generally, with respect to advertising, Cook (2001: 193-194) distinguishes between ‘intra-generic intertextuality’ and ‘inter-generic

intertextuality’. The first term is used for an advertisement which draws upon another advertisement and assumes the recipient’s knowledge of the other advertisement. In contrast, the second term applies to an advertisement which refers to knowledge of texts from other genres, like film or story.

Furthermore, Canada’s Heritage Minister Sheila Copps even presented a video of ‘the Rant’ to Americans at the International Press Institute’s World Congress in Boston in 2000 (CBC Digital Archives, 2011; International Press Institute, 2011; International Press Institute. “IPI World Congress & 49th General Assembly, Boston 2000”), and in the same year, on 24 April, Molson vice president Brett Marchand was invited to the US network NBC’s morning show Today, which aired the entire ‘Rant’ on this occasion (Etting, 2000b). Moreover, Joe Canadian became a national icon and Jeff Douglas, the actor performing ‘the Rant’, performed the skit live at hockey games, fundraising events, and at various venues on Canada Day that year (Sugars, 2006: 127). He also performed Joe Canadian on Parliament Hill in Ottawa, and across the country fans were asking him for autographs (Sugars, 2006: 135).

‘The Rant’ also had a stunning impact on corporate communications. Remember that in his ‘Rant’ Joe Canadian proclaimed that “it is pronounced ‘zed’, ‘not zee’, ‘zed’!”. When people found out that at Molson’s corporate offices in Toronto the automated voice mail system instructed callers to press ‘nine’ for ‘zee’ in spelling out the person’s last name the caller wanted to reach, Molson quickly changed the instructions to ‘zed’ (Etting, 2000a). Other Canadian firms followed suit and Nortel Networks, a manufacturer of voice-mail systems, changed ‘zee’ to ‘zed’ after receiving a number of complaints (Etting, 2000c).

Pearlstein (2000) points out that what is, generally, so noteworthy about the reaction to the ‘Rant’ is that

“it is so un-Canadian. Ever since they fled the American colonies to support their king, English-speaking Canadians have shunned the kind of flag-waving, chest-thumping, We’re-The-Best-At-Everything nationalism practised to the south. Along with gun control and national health care, a studied anti-jingoism has been a central feature of the moral superiority that Canadians feel toward the United States”.

According to Sugars (2006: 128), the overwhelming success of this commercial arose from its reflection of Canadian self-perception. Joe Canadian was able to speak for the large majority of Canadians who are “reluctant postcolonials”. Joe, representing the average Canadian, enters the stage and starts his speech in a shy way. He is reluctant to promote his home country gushingly, and therefore, is hesitant to act in opposition to the stereotype of a typical Canadian. In addition, his Canadian identity is obvious as he both dresses and behaves in a colonial way (Sugars, 2006: 128). As he proceeds with his speech he speaks what is unspeakable, that is, on the one hand, outright patriotism, and, on the other hand, the fear that Canadians are, as a matter of fact, not really that much different from Americans (Sugars, 2006: 130). In other words, ‘the Rant’ includes both “loud assertiveness and defensive insecurity” (Sugars, 2006: 135).

Furthermore, we can see the paradox of the self-ironising speech act: Joe says one thing but means another. Joe hopes that the viewer will believe the opposite of what is being performed. Joe presumes that the viewer will realise that he is not what he makes fun of. In other words, he presents himself as lacking in confidence, that is, colonial, but actually hopes that people will perceive him as self-assured, that is, postcolonial (Sugars, 2006: 133).

Bégin (2003: 179) criticises ‘the Rant’'s definition of Canadians on the basis of a negative, or, to put it differently, on what Canadians are not, instead of defining who Canadians are. Moreover, Bégin holds that Canadians, in general, find it difficult to name heroes or icons in society. This is precisely where New (1998: 53) spots an important difference between the US and Canada. Whereas US culture puts individual heroes into the centre of attention, Canadian culture reveals and accepts heroes to be human-sized, ordinary, and hence, also imperfect. Any superstar status of individuals would be regarded as suspicious over time and rejected as arrogance.

Blattberg (2003: 126) also judges ‘the Rant’ critically and claims that Joe’s utterances on Canadian society are highly superficial. For example, Joe claiming that he speaks English and French does not match reality since the large majority of his fellow English Canadians, in fact, does not speak French. For Blattberg, bilingualism across the whole country is nothing more than a myth.

Finally, on a lighter note, Ferguson and Ferguson (2001: 158) mention in their funny bestseller *How to be a*

Canadian that “[i]f those darn Americans don’t smarten up, we’ll make another beer commercial. We ain’t foolin’. We will. So they better watch it!”.

CONCLUSION

At first glance, ‘the Rant’ is a humorous Canadian TV commercial for Molson beer, which has been extremely popular and, therefore, has formed the basis for an array of parodies; it seems as if it only plays on the cultural, political, and linguistic differences between Canada and the US. Nevertheless, if we take a closer look at ‘the Rant’, from a critical discourse analytical point of view, the commercial, besides making fun of Canadian and US American stereotypes, also pursues the discursive strategies of ‘backgrounding’ and ‘suppression’ with respect to the different ethnic and language groups of Canada. On the one hand, the commercial refers to Canada’s Inuit and Francophones only implicitly. Hence, the commercial applies the strategy of ‘backgrounding’. In contrast, the commercial does not refer to Canada’s immigrant groups and Canada’s Indian peoples at all. This strategy is referred to as ‘suppression’. Hence, ‘the Rant’ addresses mainly Canadians of Anglo-Saxon ancestry. Moreover, ‘the Rant’ has been criticised since it defines Canadians on what they are not, instead of defining who they are. Finally, the commercial can be regarded as superficial, because it perpetuates the myth of the average Canadian who speaks both English and French.

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