A MULTIMODAL DIACHRONIC STUDY OF PUBLIC INFORMATION FILMS: APPLICATIONS IN THE CLASSROOM

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This paper analyses students’ reactions to the Public information films [hereafter: Pif or Pifs] presented in the UK National Archives website (http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/films/) and to a course that explored the construction of social identities in these films from a multimodal perspective (Baldry/Kantz 2009). As stated in the site’s introduction:

For the first time on The National Archives’ website you can view complete public information films from 1945-2006. Joining with the Central Office of Information (COI) to celebrate their 60th Anniversary, we have featured a selection of some of the most memorable and influential COI public information films that cover some fascinating events from Britain’s post-war history. Many of the films have both historic and nostalgic value. Historically, they reflect the issues of the day; nostalgically, everyone has a favourite.

Teachers and students of postwar English film texts will welcome the availability of a fascinating site covering 60 years of state TV and cinema propaganda, a de facto longitudinal corpus that is an endless source of entertainment as well as a genuine window on weirdness. The site’s Pifs may be examined from many perspectives ranging from changes in social attitudes and voice prosodics to the textual composition of the various Pif subgenres.

The site’s special diachronic filter is particularly appealing as it helps shift the current focus in multimodal research from how multimodal texts are constructed to why they are so constructed and why readers/viewers react to them in the ways that they do. In its belief that the young discipline of multimodality constantly needs to reflect on its roles in linguistics and Higher Education, this paper will explore the evolution of identity construction in this site in an attempt to understand how multimodal text analysis might function most advantageously in undergraduate courses.

To this end this paper reports on the reactions of 20 dentistry students in a 32-hour course of multimodal English as they came to grips with the medical, social, political, and mediational aspects of 60 years of government propaganda. As a genre, Pifs inevitably deal with unpleasant and shocking thematics but usually provide a sugar coating, often visual or musical rather than linguistic, vis-à-vis threats to a citizen’s well-being. In so doing, they construct social identities of individuals in rather grotesque, stereotypical ways that guarantee a strong response in terms of critical classroom discussions and detailed analytical comparisons in students’ exam work (Baldry, 2008).

References