

signal of what they do not want, what they hate and despise, they become, in the end, a kind of weapon. I imagine a world where one chooses to be either “sexual” or “not sexual,” partaking not on the basis of any predefined attraction or of a particular way of “doing” it, but rather whether or not they choose simply to “be” that person, regardless of how others might feel. Does it ultimately matter what label we wear? If the choices before us are simply yes or no (and surely there will always be shades of gray), then, to share a small philosophical gem from Kate Bornstein, should we not be free to love whom we choose, in any way we choose, as long as we are not mean in the process? Labels may well be an essential part of our personal growth, and as long as they are recognized as such, they’re a fine thing. At the moment we depart from that transience, though—when we take up (or cut off) arms on the basis of that same label—it’s time to stop applying them with such rigor.

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Society for Linguistic Anthropology

MARK ALLEN PETERSON AND JAMES STANLAW,
CONTRIBUTING EDITORS

Linguistic Moments in the Movies, Part VI

By Mark Allen Peterson (*Miami U*)

It’s May, end of the academic year and time for our annual roundup of films and film clips suitable for initiating discussions about language—or just a good laugh at the way the media industry represents language.

Charlie Chan in Paris (1935)

Warner Oland, the Swedish-American actor who created the astonishingly successful Charlie Chan character (44 movies with three actors between 1931 and 1949) always claimed Chan did not speak in pidgin. Rather, Oland studied immigrants (including his own parents) who thought in their native tongue, then translated into English. The distinction is most clear in this film, when a clubman introduced to the detective says in a condescending stereotype of an English/Chinese accent, “Me vely happy know you. Mebbe you likee havee little dlinkee?” Chan responds, “Very happy to make acquaintance of charming gentleman. [*code-switching to fake pidgin*] Me no likee dlinkee now [*code switching back to his usual accented English*]. Perhaps later.” Several of the early films, especially those penned by Philip MacDonald, contain scenes like this where Chan is confronted by overt racism and responds with wit. Then it hits you: this is a white actor in yellowface playing a Chinese man confronting anti-Asian racism. Meanwhile, his sons and daughters are always played by Chinese-American actors speaking idiomatic American English. The Charlie Chan films are all highly problematic and complex products of their time, and

this scene can open fascinating discussions of the role of language in the construction of race.

The Harder They Come (1972)

The first Jamaican feature-length film, this movie is in Jamaican Patwa (most DVDs offer English subtitles) and has become a standard resource in classes on Creole. The film tells the story of Ivanhoe Martin (Jimmy Cliff), who tries to rise in Jamaica’s Reggae music business, gets into the drug trade, and ultimately becomes a folk hero whose very criminality turns his previously ignored songs into huge successes. It is a bit dated now, but reviewing it in *American Anthropologist* in 1974, Michael Lieber claimed that “no ethnographic report, novel, or play with which I am familiar captures the style of West Indian urban life as vividly as *The Harder They Come*” (76[1]).

The Miracle Worker (1962)

This beloved film about Anne Sullivan’s (Anne Bancroft) struggle to teach the blind and deaf Helen Keller (Patty Duke) how to communicate can actually be difficult to teach with because it ends just as—from a linguistic perspective—it starts getting interesting. Helen finally connects signifier and referent—but only with physical objects, things she can feel and touch. The fascinating questions of how she learns grammar and intangible concepts is left to our imagination. The film is also good for starting discussions about the role of paralinguistic communication—bodily comportment—in defining people as intelligent or mentally deficient.

My Fair Lady (1964)

The musical version of this classic comedy about a cockney flower girl’s relationship with an upper class linguist is much less useful for teaching than *Pygmalion* (1938). What it does have is the marvelous song “Why Can’t the English,” in which the linguist mocks the range of British registers and the extent to which they map to class, and falsely implies other languages don’t have similar ranges of social hierarchies based on speech register.

Tortilla Soup (2001)

This film about the romances of a retired Mexican-American chef and the three daughters who share his LA home features many scenes of Spanish-English code switching. The father insists dinner table conversations be English-only, but they are filled with complex Spanish borrowings; at one point, the father even makes an explicit reference to the use of “Spanglish.” But there’s another kind of translation going on here—this film was written by Ang Lee, and is an Hispanic version of his Chinese film *Eat, Drink, Man, Woman* (*Yin Shi Nan Nu*, 1994).

Is there some movie you didn’t see here? SLA columns from May 2002, 2003, 2007, 2008 and 2009 discussed linguistic moments in films from *Airplane* to *Wayne’s World*. Check them out on AnthroSource.

Please send your comments, contributions, news, announcements and movie ideas to Jim Stanlaw (stanlaw@ilstu.edu) or Mark Allen Peterson (petersm2@muohio.edu).

Society for Medical Anthropology

KATHLEEN RAGSDALE, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

Mark Your Calendar for July 1, 2010! SMA Award Competition Deadlines

Beginning this year, several SMA awards and prizes will be offered in alternating years. This change was adopted by the SMA Board in response to membership feedback about the large number of prizes given each year, and the low volume of nominations for many awards. Awards given in 2010 will include the Eileen Basker Memorial Prize, Career Achievement Award, MASA Graduate Student Mentor Award, Steven Polgar Prize and Hughes Graduate Student Prize Paper (each described below). In 2011, SMA will sponsor the George Foster Practicing Medical Anthropology Award, New Millennium Book Award, WHR Rivers Undergraduate Student Paper Prize, and the MASA Dissertation Award, in addition to the Basker Prize and the MASA Graduate Student Mentor Award (annual).

Eileen Basker Memorial Prize

The Basker Prize is awarded for a significant contribution to excellence in research on gender and health by scholars from any discipline or nation, for a specific book, article, film or exceptional PhD thesis produced within the preceding three years. Some previous recipients of the Basker Prize include Janelle Taylor (2009), Matt Gutmann and Kathy Davis (2008), Sophie Day (2007), Michele Rivkin-Fish (2006) and João Biehl (2005). Nominations should be sent to Carolyn Sargent (Committee Chair), Department of Anthropology, Washington University in St Louis, One Brookings Drive, St Louis, MO 63130. For details, visit www.medanthro.net/awards/basker.html. Deadline: July 1, 2010.

Career Achievement Award

The Career Achievement Award honors an individual who has advanced the field of medical anthropology through career-long contributions to theory or method, and who has been successful in communicating the relevance of medical anthropology to broader publics. Candidates for this award should be senior scholars, typically those who are retiring, have achieved emeritus status, or have passed the age of 65. Under unusual circumstances exceptions to this rule may be made by the Selection Committee, with the approval of the SMA Executive Committee. Nominations for the award should include a letter of nomination, an additional supporting letter, and the candidate’s current CV. Send materials to Jeannine Coreil (Selection Committee Chair), Department of Community and Family Health, University of South Florida, 13210 Bruce B Downs Blvd, Tampa, FL 33612. For more information, visit www.medanthro.net/awards/career.html. Deadline: July 1, 2010.

MASA Graduate Student Mentor Award

This award recognizes excellence in graduate student mentorship, and is aimed at senior or