Iterative Discourse and the Formation of New Subcultures

Steve Mizrach
1997

Introduction and Definitions

Over the past two years, the focus of my research has been focused on youth subcultures in American society. I have been interested in how these subcultures have come into being, and how they maintain their solidarity and cohesiveness. There has been a great deal of research into how these subcultures come into being through organizing around music (Polhemus 1994), fashion and style (Hebidge 1977), drugs (Redhead 1993), and countercultural norms and deviant practices at odds with "straight" society (Ben-Yehuda 1990). While people have looked at some of the more unusual linguistic aspects of these groups (use of slang, anti-language, jargons, and "hip talk"), there has been no real effort to look closely at language as a determinant of sociocultural identity. While there have been efforts to look at the interrelations between language, culture, and identity, most of the research in these areas has not looked into the process of language formation and the ways in which existing languages are altered to fit new roles, perceptions, and identities.

Ever since Lee, Whorf, Berlin-Kay, et al., did their studies, it has been commonplace to assert that language shapes ones' cultural worldview and thus how they experience the world. However, such analyses have often been static. A culture's language is assumed to be derived from unmediated sensory input from their environment (hence the idea that the Esquimaux have about thirty words for snow, etc.), without any process of invention or creativity. However, what my research with these subcultures has shown is that there is a constant practice of innovation and experimentation involved in language. Further, these subcultures are aware that in rejecting existing linguistic practices, they are also challenging the norms and worldviews that they are supposed to undergird. Language is a realm of *conflict*, because worldviews are in collision, and irreconcilable differences may exist between the views of "straight" society and that of the subcultures. Linguistic identity can be *oppositional*, reflecting what the person rejects and denies as part of their life.

This view of linguistic systems as being fundamentally exploratory and experimental is not new. In physical evolution, we can see throughout the fossil record evidence of organisms trying and "probing" different developmental pathways through multiple genetic "drift". Cognitive science also shows us that the brain, in planning decisions, often runs through scenarios and possibilities, arriving at outcomes through processes of elimination. Language, I suggest, works the same way. Conservative linguists who seek to conserve the propriety of their respective languages, preserving some sort of official canon of standards, misunderstand fundamentally the way in which language works in human cultures. Linguistic innovation is a way of testing "pathways of development" for linguistic systems, attempting to find vectors which may meet future cultural demands and point the way to new directions of social change. It is a process that has been particularly accelerated by new communications technologies which propagate such innovations all the more rapidly.

The subcultures I have studied, and will discuss here in this paper, are the following :

- **Hackers** : I use this term after Levy and Meyer to refer at once to people engaged in innovative computing and technological practices, and to the "computer underground", which are people engaged in deviant and sometimes criminal computer-related activities. There is an ongoing conflict between these

two groups over who owns the term "hacker", but in any case, both represent similar subcultures with innovative linguistic practices.

- **Techno/Ravers** : this subculture consists of people who go to "raves", underground dance parties where people go to hear "techno" (electronically produced) music and have intense synaesthetic experiences which they feel are self-transforming. The ravers use an emotionally laden jargon to attempt to explain the intensity of their experiences to the "unconverted".
- **Modern Primitives** : these are people who engage in "body art", which involves unusual practices of self-modification, including tattooing, branding, piercing, hair coloration and "kinking", body deformation, and so on. While these practices are often thought to be an attempt to crudely imitate the rituals of "primitive" tribal societies (based on images of them from pop culture), or to be part of certain sadomasochistic sexual behaviors, in fact, they represent a new conception on the part of mod-prims about the role of the body and spirit in modern society, and the meaning of modernity itself.

I have found that all of these subcultures have experimented with language as a means for marking off their unique subcultural identity, and their opposition to "straight" life. In examining how these cultural "microcosms" innovate and create new language practices, we can perhaps begin to have an understanding about the role of linguistic invention in larger-scale ethnogenesis. These subcultures attempt to question meaning at a deep level, challenging existing conventions and linguistic norms, rejecting essentialist understandings of language as being static and strongly "rooted" in the external physical world, and instead promoting understandings of it as a tool for negotiating meanings and creating cultural change.

Hackers and Crackers

The hacker, according to Steven Levy and other writers, was a species of innovative computer programmer who primarily flourished in the computer-saturated environments of MIT and Stanford's Artificial Intelligence Labs (Levy 1984). Prodded on by mentors like Marvin Minsky, the hackers attempted to challenge the authorities of their time (the technician-"priests" of International Business Machines, Digital Equipment Corporation, etc.) by insisting on the "hands-on imperative" : the right to have total open access to technology so that they could discover and exploit previously unrecognized features, and detect undiscovered flaws. The hackers would resist all attempts to restrict their access to technology, and by use of tactics ranging from clever pranks to lockpicking to messing with the phone system to prowling through the campus underground tunnels, they would assert their imperative. The hacker norm of "information wants to be free" was a threat to emerging computer companies who had a proprietary interest in making sure that software could be sold and hardware secrets kept hidden from their competition... but Levy suggests it provided the basis for the breakthroughs in the development of personal computing.

In the 1980s, the media began to use the word "hacker" to refer to "clandestine computer intruders". This was because some computer security professionals referred to the brute-force attacks on password-protection schemes by such people as "hacking". Gordon Meyer's research on the mid-80s computer underground showed it consisted of people who refined techniques of computer intrusion, as well as people who manipulated the telephone networks ("phone phreaks") who asserted a "communicative imperative" (people should be able to communicate with each other without restrictions), and software "pirates" (who distribute software to others in violation of licensing and other restrictions) (Meyer 1989). Since the late 1980s, the "CU" has also come to be made up increasingly of "cypherpunks" (people who assert the use of cryptography technology as a guarantor of privacy from the State and large corporations) and virus writers - people who create self-replicating programs that can be transmitted from computer to computer through disks, network connections, and the phone lines.

The 1980s computer underground also decided they would be known as "hackers" too, since they felt they were asserting some of the same norms (the hands-on imperative) of the original 1960s hackers. However, some of the older-generation hackers (like Clifford Stoll) felt tarnished by associating their honorific with "computer crime" and destructive uses of computers. They claimed that the newer-generation hackers were actually a threat to the security, trust, and openness needed for computer networks to flourish, and that the motives of these "computer delinquents" and "techno-miscreants" were more self-aggrandizing and malicious than intellectual (i.e. wanting to know how technology worked at a fundamental level). Thus they labelled these "new" hackers "crackers", suggesting at once their tendency to "crack" the copy protection schemes on software, break into unauthorized system areas, and to damage either purposefully or inadvertently (through carelessness) precious computer data (Markoff 1991).

What I discovered in my research was that there were more connections between the two generations of hackers then their contests over who "owned" the label might indicate. Most importantly, the new hackers had borrowed much of the Hacker's Jargon which the first generation of MIT and SAIL hackers had created. This jargon was used primarily in challenging the worldview that existed outside the computer lab. People found the hackers uncomfortably different - they slept during the day, and worked on their beloved computers at night (when CPU time was more accessible); they ignored aspects of hygiene and sociability that were so critical for their peers; and strangest of all, they loved technology, and could spend hours exploring the innards of a model train, telephone, or DEC workstation. The hackers, in response, created their own topsy-turvy universe, where "winners" were people who mastered technology, and "losers" were people who used it without wanting to understand how it worked or how they could improve on it. Hacker jargon was used for jockeying for status - over who had completed the best "hacks", had written the most "righteous code", and discovered the most unexpected features of a piece of technology; and for mocking peoples' greed, anti-intellectualism, or poor programming skills.

The 90s hackers had built upon the edifice of 60s hacker jargon and had changed it in many ways. Like the first generation of hackers, many people in the 80s computer underground were basically very bright kids who didn't fit in very well at school and often found their classes less than challenging; so they sought challenge and social status through trading codez, warez, and password-spoofing tips with their hacker friends that they discovered online. Some of the new innovations that the 90s hackers introduced into hacker talk were terms borrowed from science fiction (especially the newer genre of "cyberpunk" fiction pioneered by writers like William Gibson; the older hackers had been more influenced by fantasy writers like Tolkien or Lewis Carroll), and attempts to imitate the argot of criminal organizations. Demonized by computer security people for the computer equivalent of "joyriding", many hackers responded by role-playing the identities of criminal sociopaths to get a rise out of the "narcs". The new hacker jargon was more based on discretion and secrecy, because it was necessary to hide from the prying eyes of system administrators.

Much like the earlier generation of hackers, the 90s computer underground uses hacker talk to jockey for status - employing braggadoccio for impressing others while using derogation to put down people who are thought to be beneath you in technical achievements and craftiness in evading detection. It also uses its "electronic discourse" to maintain solidarity in the face of a "straight society" which attempts to castigate it as nothing more than "criminals and miscreants". Further, like the 60s hackers, the 90s hackers are notably unconcerned with hygiene and external appearance, likely to be working at night, and determined to resist the authorities' injunctions to leave certain parts of technology unexplored. The 90s computer underground also claims to be, like them, misunderstood - they are out to aid the little guy, not steal his credit card #'s and read his private electronic mail; they write viruses as a sort of "laboratory" for evolutionary "artificial life" design, rather than to erase drives; they break into computers to go to new and unexplored digital destinations, not to crash systems or trash files.

Most importantly, the basis of the Hacker Ethic, then and now, has been a rhetoric of opposition to the idea of

intellectual property and the conservative worldview of corporate computing practices. Most software developers do not distribute "open" source code for their programs so that people can look at how they were designed, and come up with their own ideas for how to improve on the code or do the same job more efficiently. Many computer designers maintain proprietary standards on their technology, and often have a variety of coercive techniques to force people to bring equipment to "authorized" representatives for upgrades, repairs, and modifications. The hacker subculture sees much of this practice as basically slowing down and impeding innovations in computing technology. Hacker discourse, like hacker technical experimentation, is constantly changing, representing the way they feel all systems must operate in order to adapt to shifting, dynamic environments.

Techno/Ravers

In studying techno/ravers who go to the "underground" club in downtown Gainesville, Simon's InnerMind, as well as "raves" in downtown Orlando, I've discovered an interesting subculture organized around a distinctive form of music, dress, and use of drugs. This in itself is nothing new; certainly they've had predecessors in earlier postwar youth subcultures in Britain and the U.S., like the hippies, mods, skinheads, beatniks, and punks. However, a closer examination of techno/ravers show that they are an unusually different youth culture. Their beloved form of music, techno, is actually a rapidly mutating "cloud" of musical subgenres, which go by the names of techno, rave, acid jazz, house, industrial, ambient, trance, tribal, jungle, dub, etc. What most forms of techno have in common are that 1) they are electronically produced 2) they involve "acid bites" or sampling of other music and 3) they are played by DJs rather than musicians using acoustic instruments. "Techno has no stars" because DJs are essentially anonymous technicians and often invisible at a rave - they are known by their handiwork, not by their appearance or body movements, like rock stars at a concert.

Again, many of these features aren't totally unique to techno. Almost every rock band uses electric guitars or amplifiers, and certainly very little music is sold today that isn't done in an electronic studio. Further, rap and hiphop artists use sampling, and disco is often played by DJs. What is distinctive about techno music is that it's a "faceless" music - it's created and "remixed" by groups using drum machines, MIDI units, PCs, and synthesizers, and when it's played at clubs or raves, the DJ rarely announces the artist or the song. He often adds texture to the music by "tweaking" the rhythm or pitch at his console - but he almost never speaks. Techno involves unusually minimal use of lyrics, which are often "lifted" vocals from other songs that have been resampled, "sound bites" from politicians or other people repeated endlessly, or wailing "divas" which are also essentially anonymous. Basically, techno is 180 degrees apart from the "star-making" rituals of the modern popular music industry, which relies on the use of pop stars and their charisma and reputation (or infamy) to sell records. Techno music is usually released in compilations, by small "indie" recording labels.

Raving is, to a great extent, about self-expression and nonconformity. The drug Ecstasy (MDMA) is used by ravers because it supposedly heightens sensuality, emotional awareness, and feelings of interpersonal connectedness - things that are often downplayed or ignored by "straight" society. The rave dress code, rather than being based on a rote stylistic ensemble (punk = spiked hair, leather jacket, Doc Marten's), is about being willing to look however you feel like. Ravers often show up to raves dressed in ways that make them look ridiculously young (pacifiers for boys, pigtails for girls), absurd (clothes lifted right out of bad Kung Fu movies), unconventional (imitating the gay or black culture), or loud (brightly colored fractal ties, glowing lightsticks, weird jewelry). But the rave culture isn't about showing off - nobody puts you down, but nobody butters you up for dressing up or down either (Polhemus 1994). Ravers say they like techno music because "it lets your mind fill in the blanks" - claiming that when they dance in large groups, listening to techno, taking "XTC", they are able to see "meanings" in the music through the intense synaesthetic experiences it creates in

conjunction with the visual displays (lasers, holograms, strobes, video toaster barrages, etc.) at raves.

The ravers feel that music has a deep psychological and emotional impact on the listener, and that each of the different kinds of techno "resonate" with different aspects of a person's being. Ambient is cerebral, aimed at the mind; hardcore techno is kinetic, aimed at the feet; and dub and jungle are "soulful", aimed at the spirit. Much of raver jargon revolves around identifying the various subgroups found at rave parties (zippies, cyberpunks, technos, goths, indies, grungers, earth girls, etc.) and the subgenres of techno music, as well as "code words" revolving around "rolling" or the use of "XTC" or MDMA and other drugs at raves. But more importantly, rave discourse revolves around a language artfully crafted to describe the sublime emotional states ravers feel they experience at raves. "Raving", after all, is the way most people refer to the forms of exuberant, uncontrolled, quasi-prophetic modes of speech found in fanatics of all stripes. And to ravers, this is how the rave party makes them feel.

Claiming that ordinary language is far too impoverished, raver talk uses a series of imaginative adjectives and nouns to refer to things that the "outsider" couldn't possibly understand. He or she simply has to go to a rave, and see what they are talking about - to use the common metaphors, it would be like describing the color red to a blind man or a 747 to a caveman. Ravers talk about each person having a unique "vibration" or frequency that is entrained and transformed by the music, and how groups of people gathered in synchronous dance form a "self-iterative fractal" of harmonious motion. Rave talk can be wildly science-fictional, about how the music puts people in touch with alien interplanetary intelligences or Gaian minds. The rave is supposed to take people of all races, colors, and nationalities and unite them into a consciousness synchronized around the pulsating rhythm of techno - a group trance dance for the global village, they say. Rave music is said to break down boundaries - those of self-limitation, and of alienation from their fellow humans (Redhead 1993).

I've found a lot of interesting commonalities between ravers and hackers. Indeed, many techno DJs claim that their craft is a lot like "hacking sound". They claim to work with music as a fundamental level (the basic "wave envelope" of sonic frequency), just as hackers emphasize the need to go "root" and reach the most basic level (machine code) of "speaking" with the computer. DJs say that sampling, like hacking, is a way of taking other peoples' music and improving on it by modifying it and turning it into a whole new product - it's appropriation, not theft. They rebel against the idea of musical copyright and intellectual property with the same vehemence that hackers take against software copy protection. Creating a great techno song involves the art of "mixing" in all the right software elements, just as designing a good software program means "mixing" together code from a lot of other previous programs to get the job done... the techno DJ is expected to produce something new and unexpected at his turntable, just as the hacker is in front of his computer terminal. Most importantly, both groups are constantly at work innovating new elements of language for creating a subcultural identity at odds with dominant self-images and norms.

Modern Primitives

As many commentators have noted, the so-called "modern primitive" movement exposes a lot of interesting contradictions within society. Lots of body adornment in "modern" society is tolerated and seen as being "civilized" and quite normal, even expected or insisted upon. Women in particular are expected to pierce their ears, adorn their face with makeup, and diet to maintain an almost impossibly thin somatic norm. However, largely due to the influence of rather culturally un-relativistic "psychotronic" and "shock" documentaries from the 30s through the 60s about other "primitive" or "savage" cultures in Africa and the Americas, people have come to associate rituals such as scarification, pigmentation, elongating or reshaping the head, neck, or ears, etc., with so-called "primitive" tribal societies. In the "civilized" First World, tattoos and body markings have

always traditionally been the domain of "outlaw" groups (bikers, S&M fetishists or "perverts", prostitutes, carnival freaks, etc.) who are also felt to be "outside" the boundaries of modern civilization. For these reasons, those involved in the "skin art" movement, where the body is seen as a canvas, have often been unfortunately labelled "modern primitives" (Re/Search 1989).

They have come to accept that label, however, because in many ways their subculture is one of opposition to "industrial culture" and the idea of progress inherent in modernity. The mod-prims suggest that the idea that modernity has somehow "outgrown" or "superseded" the need for ritual, taboo, and body-play, is far from the truth. They deny that practices like piercing are somehow "regressive" to an earlier culture-evolutionary stage; in fact, many assert that in fact in the 20th century (with the emergence of "primitivism" in Picasso and other "modern" artists, the resurgence of "tribalism" in the global village, the new "nomadism" of the high-tech professional class, etc.) we are really experiencing an "archaic revival" where the past will reconnect cyclically with the future. Industrial society, they say, has psychically numbed people, with assembly-line mass production, rote learning, conspicuous consumption, and robotic entertainment for leisure. Body-play is one of the ways of escaping from, and working around, the numbness foisted on the body by modern industrial existence (Re/Search 1988).

The mod-prims assert that so much of modernity has revolved around the denial and suppression of pain. Aspirin, valium, and a host of other drugs exist to suppress physical and emotional pain - but they don't cure the sources of physical and psychic irritation from the chemicals and toxins of industrial society, or the noise and cacophany that accompany urban life. Piercing is one way in which they attempt to "reacquaint" themselves with pain, and rediscover the control over the spirit which modern man has lost in losing his connection to the body. Normally people in modern industrial society sleep in a sort of half-dormant languor, the mod-prims claim, lulled into a kind of trance by the drone of commercials, empty talk, and vacuous political rhetoric. Piercing is a way of reawakening the senses, and of rediscovering the links between pleasure and pain. While many piercings (especially the genital area) are sexual in nature, the mod-prims insist it's not all about sadomasochism or sex.

Rather, for the mod-prims, piercing, and other "skin art" practices like branding, tattooing, hair sculpting and shaving, painting, etc. are for inscribing the body - for communicating with people at a most basic and fundamental level, beyond spoken language. The body is a canvas, and the artist in this case is attempting to use the Self for his palate; he becomes, through self-modification, a work of art, a goal as old as the alchemists who sought to become symbolic gold (Arnold 1988). While many people communicate nonverbally, through gesture or kinesis, the mod-prim does it directly, silently, without even having to move. The mod-prims attempt to tell people around them about how to get in touch with their bodies again, to have in aspect of their life which is under their own control, and not just merely a mediated experience packaged for them by someone else. What Stelarc and other "die-hard" so-called "self-abusers" who pierce themselves and then hang from hooks are trying to "say", silently, is that mastering pain is a source of psychic self-control in an unstable world, and perhaps even a tool for self-transcendence and other experiences.

The linguistic innovation of the modern primitives is not within the spoken or written worlds. Rather, their "jargon" is bodily, and their new "language" is written on the physical template of the self. Within the externalizing world of "mainstream" culture, this can be unsettling and uncomfortable to many people. Most people still adhere to the norm that when you talk to someone, your body shouldn't "get in the way" - i.e. hand movements are distracting and to be avoided, you should look people in the eye, and you should stand still. Mod-prims feel you should communicate not only through the body, but with it - as an instrument, a writing stylus. Most don't feel there really is such a thing as a disembodied self that communicates - only that Western culture tells us to suppress our body and communicate only through our heads and mouths. Mod-prims don't feel language should make your "comfortable" - rather it should be sharp, pointed, direct, aimed at waking you from industrial slumber, much like the grating, irritating music at an industrial concert; for it is the irritation of the

oyster that creates the pearl.

Conclusions

What I have been trying to emphasize throughout this paper is the fact that, just as a certain element of creativity and artifice might be involved in hacking a computer terminal, DJing a techno song, or doing a piercing, there is an element of playfulness and experimentation in the design of language. Languages don't just emerge without reflection from some impulse to essentialize and label experiences in the external world. New subcultural jargons don't just appear out of the unconscious without prompting - they're "mixed" together out of borrowings from earlier youth cultures, global pop culture and the mass media, and other sources. To these appropriations, there is appended a constant process of innovation, in which people are adding terms out of a need to describe within their subculture sentiments, quirky behaviors, intergroup dissensions and rivalries, fluctuating identities, etc. which they couldn't express any other way. The subcultural jargons don't exist merely to alienate the outsider - they are to explore and probe new possibilities and options for the larger "mainstream" culture as a whole. People are self-aware of their own languages, and what they may see as its limitations or its insufficiencies.

Linguistic anthropologists need to look at language less as a set of objective "mappings" to the world, and more as a field of intentionalities being played out. It might be useful to think of language truly as a code - much like the DNA code or the programming code that drives a computer - for sociocultural evolution. Whorf gave us the tools to analyze how language might shape culture and perception. But he didn't look closely at the way in which people who understand this fact might also work to *exploit* it, using language for guiding worldviews into new and unancticipated directions. The youth subcultures of the 90s have created oppositional discursive systems - but these don't constitute only a rejection of the larger culture, rather a challenge for it to adapt and change. Subcultural jargon is a "linguistic laboratory" because inevitably subcultural terms "filter" out to the culture at large. Linguistic systems are being "hacked" together by hundreds of individuals, resulting in emergent evolutionary trajectories shaping the worldview and perceptions of societies. Inevitably, people wishing to shift or realign those trajectories will work around the edge of the system, or, with some more boldness, may have the daring to "go root" and challenge the meanings at the "core".

Bibliography

- Ben-Yehuda, Nachman, *The Politics and Morality of Deviance*, SUNY Press, Albany, 1990.
- Feher, Michel; Naddaff, Ramona; and Tazi, Nadia, eds., *Fragments for a history of the human body*, Zone Vol. 3, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1989.
- Hafner, Katie; and Markoff, John; *Cyberpunk: Outlaws and Hackers on the Computer Frontier*. Simon and Schuster, New York, 1991.
- Hebidge, Dick. *Subculture: the meaning of style*, Cambridge, London, 1977.
- Levy, Steven, *Hackers: Heroes of the Computer Revolution*, Anchor/Doubleday Press, Garden City, 1984.
- Meyer, Gordon R., "The Social Organization of the Computer Underground", M.A. Thesis, University of Northern Illinois, 1989.
- O'Neill, John, *The Communicative Body*: Studies in Communicative Philosophy, Politics, and Sociology, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1993.
- Polhemus, Ted, *Streetstyle*, Thames and Hudson, New York, 1994.

- RE/Search Publications, *Industrial Culture Handbook*, Subco, Eugene, 1988.
- Re/Search, *Modern primitives* : an investigation of contemporary adornment & ritual, Re/Search Publication, San Francisco, 1989.
- Redhead, Steve, ed. *Rave Off!*: Politics and Deviance in Contemporary Youth Culture, Ashgate Publishing, Brookfield, 1993.
- Ross, Andrew; and Penley, Constance, eds.; *Technoculture*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1991.
- Rubin, Arnold, ed., *Marks of civilization*: artistic transformations of the human body, Museum of Cultural History, University of California, Los Angeles, 1988.
- Rushkoff, Douglas. *Cyberia*: Life in the Trenches of Hyperspace, HarperCollins, San Francisco, 1994.
- Sharpe, Patricia, and E. Mascia-Lees, Frances, eds., *Tattoo, torture, mutilation, and adornment* : the denaturalization of the body in culture and text, SUNY Press, Albany, 1992.
- Slobin, Mark. *Subcultural Sounds*: Micromusics of the West, Wesleyan University Press, Hanover, 1993.
- Sterling, Bruce, *The Hacker Crackdown*: Law and Disorder on the Electronic Frontier, Bantam, New York, 1992.