

GRAPHIC
ASSIMILATION:

New immigrants and social identity

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social service
community
assimilation
identity

Delivery of essential social service information to immigrant groups in the United States raises issues of language, cultural imagery, social status and identity. Two perspectives on these issues are offered. From a formal viewpoint, theories of materiality of meaning and the construction of social identity provide insight regarding perception of identity based on representation in print publications. From a grassroots viewpoint, Hmong and Somali focus group discussions explore the character and practical nature of information available to their respective communities. The goal of the paper is to explore appropriate design strategies for bilingual communication for new (Somali) and more integrated (Hmong) residents of Minnesota.

An increase in refugee immigration has challenged professional communicators to develop multilingual informational materials. A recently completed study examined the visual communication of public service information from community service organizations to an audience of culturally diverse readers who have been in the United States less than five years.

Focus groups of recent Hmong and Somali immigrants participated in two sessions to determine appropriate design strategies for bilingual communication. Subjects preferred bilingual publications (English/Hmong; English/Somali) with layouts that were clear, used limited text, organized information with bulleted lists, used a simple bold font and contained culturally appropriate imagery. Recommendations for design procedures included using several translators from different sub-groups within each culture and testing the information with focus groups before publishing (Chu & Martinson, 2000).

In addition to the pragmatic issues of designing for a multilingual audience, a number of social issues emerged during the focus group discussions. There were distinct differences between Hmong and Somali participants regarding their reactions to currently available publications targeted at each group. While the participants in both focus groups had been in the United States for less than five years, the first Hmong refugees had begun arriving in Minnesota in the late 1970s and they established connections within the community and created social service agencies and political organizations (Minnesota has the first Hmong state legislator).



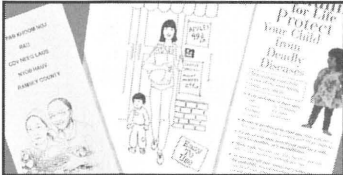
Participants in the Hmong focus group expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of publications that are available specifically for Hmong immigrants. Many of the publications have been developed by non-profit community service organizations with restricted budgets. The resulting publications are inexpensively produced, and most have not been created by designers. Members of the focus group asserted that poor production quality makes a negative social statement. Lesser quality indicates lower status within the social system. Many of the publications included images of Hmong in ceremonial dress. This is not typical everyday dress for the Hmong, and these images cause potential Hmong readers to assume that the information pertains to a special event, when in fact it may provide instructions on how to attain medical help. Service organizations have used such images to signify Hmong culture in general. There seems to be a disconnect between intended and perceived representation. Hmong participants perceived the slickness of typical American print communications to signify a position of power over the groups depicted in lesser quality publications.

The Somali focus group enthusiastically embraced any publications that included the Somali language. As a more recent immigrant group in Minnesota, printed information is scarce. Quality of production was not of great concern; access to information was deemed most important. Both the Hmong and Somali have been primarily verbal cultures, so the concept of print communication is relatively recent.

Reactions to this social phenomenon will be examined in relation to the role that materiality plays in social identity. A theoretical approach, adapted from Manuel Castells' project identity will be used to discuss how the perception of identity is based on representation in print publications (Castells, 1997). Moya's realist theory of identity will be used to describe the notion of identity development when settling in a new culture (2002). The recent immigrants must build a new identity that defines their position in society. In that process their cultural identity and the identity of the communities that they inhabit will change.

FIGURE 1: | *Hmong brochures*

FIGURE 2: | *Somali brochures*





identity and *social location*

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The recent immigrants' ability to forge an identity within a community will depend on their ability to learn about social and economic variables related to their position in society and their own community (Moya, 2002). This lesson will be learned in many different ways — interactions with others within the cultural group, interactions with established citizens of the community, media, the physical environment and community organizations. The immigrants' social location within the new culture will depend on their skills at understanding how the world works and what they need to know and do to survive and thrive within the community.

Hmong immigrants in Minnesota have established networks of support organizations and have achieved a solid identity as a cultural group that is cohesive and flourishing. The newer immigrants from Somalia are only just beginning to determine their social location. Media is essential to this process. Visual representation is the "privileged space of politics, without it there is no chance of exercising power" (Castells, 1997, 311). Identity-based initiatives have the potential to affect marginalized people in the United States. Images, bilingual ballots and signage are forces in developing an identity and a place within society (Moya, 2002). Identity is constructed from history, geography, economic variables, aspects of housing and education and a variety of associations. The construction of a collective identity is essential for the members within the immigrant group and for those outside of the group. Cultural self-definition is essential to survival in a new context; identity is influenced from both within and outside of the group (Castells, 1997).



Various social categories combine to form a person's social location — the type of work one is involved in, religious beliefs, where one lives, behavior, ethnicity and the activities that one is involved with. Immigrants often straddle between categories with regard to work, beliefs and belonging exclusively to a particular ethnic group. The way in which members of the group are depicted in the media and printed publications, and how they are depicted in society determines their social location. The mutual interaction of categories determines social location and situates members of the group within the social, cultural and historical matrix in which they exist (Moya, 2002).

Identity is the primary source of meaning and experience. It involves distinctions between the self and others, contains a plurality of identities and adapts with new social interactions and social representations (Castells, 1997). Adaptation of identity can cause stress as an individual or group adjusts to a new culture. According to de Ventos, identity is constructed through the interaction of four variables:

- 1 | primary factors such as ethnicity and language;
- 2 | generative factors such as the development of communications;
- 3 | induced factors such as codification of language; and
- 4 | reactive factors such as the search for alternative identities (Castells, 1997, 31).

Both the Hmong and Somali immigrants have had radical changes in communication and language during the resettlement process because they have been primarily oral cultures.

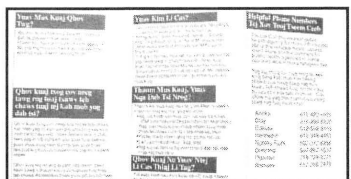
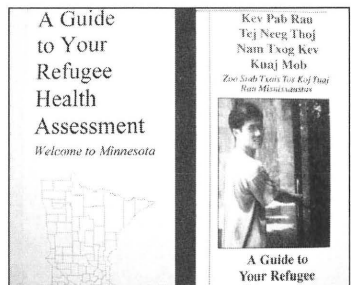
Castells identifies three forms of identity building. The first is Legitimizing Identity, which is introduced by the dominant institutions of society to extend and rationalize authority and nationalism. The second is Resistance Identity, which is generated by those in stigmatized positions. Finally, Project Identity refers to the construction of a new identity that redefines a new position in society and works toward a transformation of the overall social structure (Castells, 1997). Hmong immigrants, who, as a group have been in the United States for approximately twenty-five years, have built a new identity as an ethnicity within Minnesota — their project identity has resulted in a growing Hmong community, participation in community life and positions of leadership both within and outside of the Hmong community. The Somali immigrants, on the other hand, are only just beginning to construct their identity in Minnesota. Service organizations are gaining strength and Somali immigrants are finding employment and housing. They are creating a distinct community. Perhaps the most distinguishing element of Somali women is their dress. Clothing can both identify and stigmatize a cultural group. Moya asserts that some social identities are fictitious and even dangerous because fictions are treated as facts. This can be especially true shortly after the arrival of a new immigrant group. Many Somali women had a difficult time finding employment because of their dress. A negatively constructed identity can serve oppressive and ideological functions that shift one group's status in relation to others in the same society (Moya, 2002) The effort to integrate new immigrants into an existing culture is challenging.


During the nineteenth century, de Tocqueville saw such integration as embodying democracy and civility; Foucault and Sennett see, in the same phenomenon, domination and legitimization of an over-imposed, undifferentiated normalizing identity (Castells, 1997). With new immigrant groups there is a conflict or interplay between two forces: the struggle to maintain a distinct cultural identity while also becoming part of an established civil society. How do visual representations maintain this distinctness, but also align part of the identity with the new society? How can this dual nature of new citizens be represented?

FIGURE 3: | *Hmong Ramsey County*

FIGURE 4: | *WIC Hmong*

FIGURES 5, 6: | *Hmong Redesign*



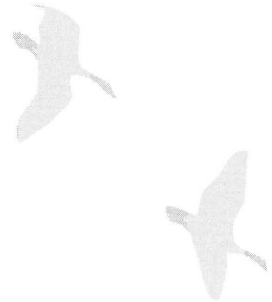


Identities are not singular. Moya (2002, 41) asserts that identities "are subject to multiple determinations and to a continual process of verification that takes place over the course of an individual's life through her interaction with the society she lives in." By depicting Hmong immigrants in ceremonial dress, community service organizations were hoping to communicate that the printed information was intended for Hmong. These representations influenced Hmong identity in a contradictory way to the Hmong community — they did not dress in ceremonial dress on an everyday basis and so the Hmong read the image as referring to a ceremony rather than to healthcare. To non-Hmong viewers these images stereotype the new refugees and may have further distanced the Hmong from society-at-large. This certainly was not the intention of the community service organization. Nonetheless, the interpretation did not match the intention of signaling that the publication was aimed at a Hmong audience. This depiction of ethnicity was intended to be supportive of a communal identity and to appeal to new immigrants. Instead it was a subtle (albeit unintentional) form of cultural hegemony.


The use of ceremonial dress in publications established the new immigrants as different, as people very unlike those who already live in Minnesota. The dress displayed an identity that referred outward to the social world — we would know the Hmong as those who wore that type of ceremonial dress. This representation created a distinct identity of Hmong immigrants. An analysis of the way these identities are constructed can provide important insights about fundamental aspects of United States society (Moya, 2002). Images in publications positioned the immigrants in the society, but showed them as being set apart from it. While their physical location was the inner city, their social location was as the 'other,' as individuals quite different from the mainstream population, many of whom are of northern European descent.

The realist theory of identity insists that we acknowledge and interrogate the consequences of social location and how that location is symbolized overtly within society. The categories and positions have real material effects (Moya, 2002). This theory is in opposition to the essentialist stance that asserts the notion that individual and discoverable essence constitute one social category that is determinate for the cultural individual or group in question (Moya, 2002). The realist theory of identity claims that cultural identity is in constant formation based on one's experience. The way in which new immigrants are represented influences the construction of their identity within and outside of the group. Each individual will interpret his or her experience somewhat differently and so identities are not so homogeneous as assumed by the essentialist theory. Participants in the Hmong focus group discussed the disconnect between the way that Hmong immigrants were represented and their sense of identity in everyday life. The challenge in designing for new cultural groups is to develop appropriate representations that will maintain the integrity of those represented and communicate positively their place in society.

The social construction of identity involves material considerations. The representational theory of language relies on the mistaken assumption that there is direct correspondence between signs and their real-world referents — that intrinsic meaning exists in those real-world referents (Moya, 2002). Castells (1997) asserts that power lies in the codes of information and in the “images of representation around which societies organize their institutions, and people build their lives and decide their behavior” (359). Visual language works to establish identity and denotes location in the society.



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materiality and
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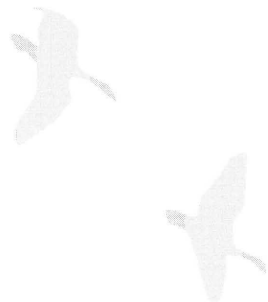
Participants in the Hmong focus group were quite fervent in their discussion of the quality of the printed publications provided in Hmong. Many of the publications are photocopied on poor quality copier paper. Others are produced with a dot-matrix printer and are barely legible. Hmong participants said that the poor quality of reproduction signaled a lower worth than professionally designed brochures, which are typical of medical centers and other organizations. When the Hmong group was asked how they would design a brochure, the first items they mentioned were the use of a quality paper and professional-looking photographs. The physical quality of the publication played an important role in indicating social location. "The hastily torn scrap of paper has different sets of potentials as a signifier than does the beautifully made weighty sheet. Glossy paper has the possibility of signals of a different kind to matte and serves as a signifier of value" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, 232). Many of the publications were produced by service organizations on very limited budgets, using older computers, printers and copy machines. These organizations were doing the best that they could with the materials at hand. From their perspective, the information contained in the publications was more essential than the look or quality. However, the implied communication of the materials used was understood by the focus group as denoting a lower class of importance.


The reproduction method of photocopying resulted in a cheap and unfinished look. Reproductive technology, so pervasive in our culture, carries a message in terms of the quality of the printing, the images and the paper. "There is power in mass production . . . in images, in technologies" (Touraine, 1995; quoted in Castells, 1997, 309). Pragmatic means of production were at odds with the intent of the community organizations. The subtle communication of poor quality paper, type and production methods lowered the import of the content.

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Each visual piece of communication is a combination of signifying systems; the means of production is of no lesser importance than the content. Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) assert the importance of the material aspects of the message and its means of inscription — how the marks have been made on the paper or canvas: “The mode of inscription changes the text — this aspect of text is gaining importance . . . the material presentation of the text is always significant; it is a separately variable semiotic feature. Texts are material objects which result from a variety of representational practices that make use of a variety of signifying systems, each of which contributes to the meaning of a text in its own particular way” (231). The informational brochures contained text on a literal level and the overall signifying text that combined the content with the images, layout and paper. This overall text signified a class differential between publications for the new immigrants and those produced for the established general public.

Technological advances have increased the quality of typical print projects in the United States. Poorly produced materials are seen with less frequency. In United States culture, a fairly polished look is expected in most print communications. “Every culture has systems of meanings coded in materials and in the means of processes of inscription” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, 232). Technology has had a significant impact on the forms of inscription. Technology itself becomes visually semiotic. Walter Benjamin discussed the nature of mechanical reproduction, the idea of reproducibility and how reproduction could change forms of social organization in society. Social hierarchy is implied in the quality of print publications. The nature of an inscription and the surface that the inscription occurs upon will alter the reception of the message; the physicality of the object has an effect on the overall meaning.





challenges of communication

This activity of identity formation is elemental in establishing the immigrant group within an existing society.

The look of publications can influence the self-definition of the new immigrant groups and can also influence the formation of their identity within the established communities. Poorly produced brochures become informational propaganda with a subtext of lower societal position. While the information contained in the brochures was important, the affective reaction to the publications relegated the information to a position of little consequence. It is essential for the producers of print communication to take into account the physical aspects of the finished publications in order to avoid stigmatizing the target group.

The importance of appropriately expressing identity and having it recognized by others is essential (Castells, 1997). This activity of identity formation is elemental in establishing the immigrant group within an existing society. While the paper and methods of reproduction may seem of less importance than content, they must be recognized as integral parts of the message.



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