

Book Review: Post-Communist Teen Magazines Bend Language and Culture

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Language in Use: The Case of Youth Entertainment Magazines. Edited by Loredana Fratila and Hortensia Parlog. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010. 175 pp. \$58.99 hardcover.

You might not know how to say “hello” if you landed in some random post-communist land, but rest assured that most people under 20 would get “sexy,” “gossip girl,” and “shopping.” This strangely selective English fluency reflects the language of youth magazines, according to a recent collection of articles by Slovenian, Romanian, and Bulgarian linguists.

Language in Use, co-edited by two Romanian professors of English, Loredana Fratila and Hortensia Parlog, presents youth entertainment magazines as important 21st-century linguistic documents, closely mirroring changes in adolescents’ language use in order to remain profitable. Fratila and Parlog argue that “teenagers have always had their own jargon, with characteristics that stand out and that ... transcend national and cultural borders” (p. vii). Emulating the conversational style of English-language magazines, the analyzed glossies have begun to rework their countries’ linguistic markings of social distance. Across countries, linguists noted that youth magazines (a) used second-person pronouns to construct an illusionary relationship with readers and (b) used presumptive questions (“Are you overburdened?”) as segue to simplistic and manipulative answers.

The language of post-communist youth magazines increasingly reflects the mediated construction of global and enduring teen identities, such as the “cool girl” with a life “dominated by consumption, Internet, fashion and peer rivalry” (p. 20), writes Irina Madroane in the first chapter. And as in the West, these publications mirror generational tensions. For older people in post-communist countries, colorful and lighthearted magazines, once smuggled from abroad, used to represent dissent with the communist regimes. By contrast, their children and grandchildren welcome the glossies as everyday gates to “consensual participation in a soft power game that entails the commodification of the self, sometimes in its most intimate aspects,” writes Madroane.

As vehicles of their county’s recently established capitalism, contemporary Romanian youth magazines cover globally ubiquitous topics (music, films, celebrities, school, and sex) through a “continuous conversation mode” and from the standpoint of a “friendly

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authority,” suggest Codruta Gosa and Luminita Frentiu in the second chapter. In the next chapter, Fratila and Parlog outline how the same youth magazines achieve brevity and breeziness by adapting English words (i.e., “accessorize” to “accesoriza”) or creating new ones when an appropriate translation from English is lacking (i.e., “fructat” for “fruity”). Under the influence of English, Romanian magazines also overuse superlatives, intensifiers (including borrowed ones, such as “cool”), abbreviations (such as “demo,” “bi,” “glam,” and “sys”), and alphanumeric (such as “cool 4 boys” and “girl 2 girl”). This “extensive use of English loan words” reflects teens’ “desire to identify themselves with the British-American super-civilization, to which their parents had been denied access,” suggest Fratila and Parlog. In this cultural illusion, youth magazines are their accomplices.

Similar patterns emerge in the popular Slovene teen magazine *Smirklja* (meaning “brat”), which has adapted English words such as “life” to Slovene pronunciation, as illustrated by its popular section “love laif,” writes Smiliana Komar in the fourth chapter. She also observes that in online comments on the magazine’s site, teenagers often use emoticons and unmodified English words and phrases in Slovene sentences, such as “tenkju” (an orthographical adaptation of “thank you”). In the following chapter, analyzing the same magazine, Andrej Stopar reports 56 English loanwords in just one issue, along with many orthographical adaptations (“seksi” for “sexy,” “beibi” for “baby,” etc). *Smirklja* also offers culturally hybridized advice by alluding to American TV shows, such as *Sex and the City*, and by using manipulative linguistic features borrowed from U.S. magazines, including simplistic solutions and directives, such as “you have to,” “you can,” and “should/must.”

In the last two chapters, Liliana Grozdanova and Maria Georgieva offer a similar linguistic and discourse analysis of Bulgarian youth entertainment magazines. Unlike previous scholars, Grozdanova is less concerned about loanwords and more alarmed by content encouraging teens to conform and to accept “unwarranted factuality.” (She illustrates this with the sentence “Eminem cannot go to the neighborhood store without being recognized by his fans,” which assumes that Eminem lives in a neighborhood with a local store—common in Bulgaria but obsolete in America.) By contrast, Georgieva sees mostly positives in teen magazines’ hybridization, arguing that adaptations of English words and discourse structures help young students of English as a foreign language and improve their “socialization into a range of globally oriented domains” (p. 151)—ideally, without losing their own culture.

Although the book often references linguistic terminology, it has much value to scholars who study magazines from the perspective of critical and cultural studies. It would be a thought-provoking reading for graduate students of media studies, especially those who are bilingual and bicultural, but less likely to hold the attention of students at the undergraduate level.