Semantics in Duck Dynasty: The Robertson Family Language

*Duck Dynasty* has recently begun to take America by force. Over 8.6 million people tuned in to view the third season premiere on 27 February 2013, making it the most watched show ever on A&E, it’s distributor, and the “top cable program of the night” (O’Connell). The reality television program follows the lives of the Robertson family, owners of Duck Commander and Buck Commander, a family business that they have grown from a backyard operation to a multi-million dollar company. With such a sizeable viewership, the Robertsons and their quirky way of life have become well known across the nation. One very distinct characteristic exhibited by the Robertsons is their use of language. The family uses several distinct “catch phrases” that reflect a variety of semantic concepts.

In order to research these concepts, I watched several episodes of the television show, beginning with the premiere of the first season and continuing until the finale of season three. This review of the show allowed me to perform a close reading of the material. “A reading then, is an attempt to understand the socially shared meanings that are supported by words, images, objects, actions, and messages” (Brummet 7). In examining a text, several of these aspects work together to form a reading. For the purposes of this paper, I focused on the words used by the family members on the show. To explore and analyze the Robertson’s use of language, it is important to understand its semiotics. This is “the relationship among signs, meanings, and referents"(Palczewski 36). The study of semiotics allows critical audiences to study the signification of words used in the text. This paper aims to identify each “catch phrase” of the Robertson family and analyze its semantic properties.

Perhaps the most readily recognizable catch phrase from the show is that of the interjection, “Hey!” used by Uncle Si. The term is so distinct to Si and Duck Dynasty and so widely embraced by its viewers, that Duck Commander has begun to sell T-shirts adorned with the interjection (Shirts). One example of Si’s frequent use of the term occurs in the episode “Battle of the Brothers.” Here, he uses it multiple times in one discussion:

Hey, talkin’ about that, okay, I come to work the other day, there was a cockroach. This sucker was, at least, probably a foot, maybe eighteen inches long. Hey, Jep come up ‘bout that time and, hey, we both tried to stomp it. Hey, you talkin’ about fast, hey, that sucker was fast, Jack.

Si’s excessive use of the word, “hey,” is discussed in the season one episode, “Redneck Logic,” in which his nephew, Jase Robertson, observes, “The word, ‘hey,’ is like a fabric woven into Si’s character.” Si’s sister-in-law, Miss Kay, remarks, “You’ll hear it and you’ll think, ‘Is he gonna say this 59 times every conversation?’ And he does” (“Catch Phrases”). According to Si Robertson himself, “It’s automatic. I say ‘hey.’ Hey can mean yes, hey can mean maybe, hey can mean no, hey can mean next week. The bottom line is, you gotta understand me to understand ‘hey’” (Redneck Logic).

This unclear definition is an example of vagueness in semantics, which is defined as words that “aren’t so easily clarified by context” (Denham 307). When vagueness occurs in speech, the recipient must ascribe the appropriate meaning through his or her own interpretation of the conversation. As Si tells his family, “Y’all give it the meaning you want it to have” (Redneck Logic).

Because Si uses the word “hey” without ascribing it any specific meaning, it becomes clear that he is using it merely as a discourse marker. In her article, “Discourse Markers as Functional Elements,” Mădălina Matei describes discourse markers as:

*sentence constituents* or *functives*, textual elements that connect sentences and ‘partial utterences’ into a coherent text. They are constitutive elements that are semantically void…The sentence constituents function as a code which is recurrent…and this is why their repeated structure is known to native speakers (120).

Another very popular Robertson family catch phrase comes from the patriarch, Phil’s, use of the term, “happy, happy, happy.” His daughter-in-law, Missy, remarks, “Phil says ‘happy, happy, happy’ all the time” (Catch Phrases). When asked about the phrase, his wife states, “It just came right off the tip of his tongue” (Catch Phrases). Like Si’s exclamation, “hey,” Phil’s phrase “happy, happy, happy” is so wildly popular with viewers of the show that there are several different shirts available on the Duck Commander website with the phrase emblazoned across the front (Shirts).

Phil uses the repetitious term “happy, happy, happy” in lieu of the single word, happy, but does not ascribe a new meaning to it. Denham and Lobeck describe this as total reduplication, the process of forming new words by doubling an entire free morpheme (205). Daniela Rossi expands on this definition in her article, “Lexical Reduplication and Affective Contents: A Pragmatic and Experimental Perspective:”

…the words involved in lexical reduplication must be contiguous, share all the same phonemes and graphemes, share the same semantic features, and belong to the same grammatical category and the same clause (149).

Phil Robertson takes this one step further by adding the third repetition. In semantics, reduplication is used as to demonstrate a heightened sense of intensity felt by the speaker. In this case, Phil is more than just happy. He’s happy, happy, happy.

Phil Robertson is also responsible for the use of the word “yuppie” on the show. He uses it as a derogatory term to describe everyone and everything that is not of the woods or nature. He remarks, “Stack ‘em like sardines, one of ‘em against the other one, it becomes a way of life. Suburbia. In my opinion, that would be a pretty boring existence, when your neighbor’s house is about ten feet over there” (AETV).

Missy, a “yuppie girl” herself, observes, “I guess [yuppie] would mean civilized…If you’re not of Phil’s mindset, then you’re off somehow” (AETV). Because these people are not like Phil and don’t share his interests, the term “civilized” is not applied as a compliment. Phil is wary of civilization, preferring instead to remain in nature. According to another daughter-in-law, Jessica, yuppies are “city people that don’t generally know anything about hunting or live that lifestyle” and her husband, Jep, states, “Pretty much anybody that doesn’t spend time in the woods, that’s a yuppie” (AETV).

The earliest recorded use of the term “yuppie” occurred in 1983 in an article written by Bob Green about social networking parties. Green describes hearing one patron say that the host was striving to be “king of the yuppies” (Shapiro 139). According to the Online Etymology Dictionary, the word first came into being in 1982 as an acronym for “young urban professional” but was regarded as an insult by 1985 (Yuppie). The changing meaning behind this word makes it an example of semantic shift, specifically, pejoration. This is the shift of words’ meanings from neutral or positive to negative. “Yuppie” has been in existence for only thirty-one years, but underwent the process of pejoration very quickly.

Today, “yuppie” is still seen as a negative term. Urban Dictionary, an online dictionary comprised of definitions submitted by users, provides a clear picture of the general public’s use of the term today. User definitions include “any rich person who is not modest about their financial status” (Don) and “young, wealthy people, typically successful in business and not afraid to flaunt it in a fashion which particularly irritates non-yuppies” (^\_^). One user goes into depth about the attitude of a yuppie:

[A yuppie is] a person who believes that they deserve their high pay much more than anyone else who works just as hard as they do. They have a lot of shiny objects and generally look down upon those who do not have shiny objects, or those with less shiny objects” (Jimmy D).

These definitions, provided by the public, demonstrate the underextension that is applied to the negative characterization of the word. Phil carries this underextension even farther than the public in his use of the term, and is responsible for the family’s understanding of it. Because of Phil, “yuppie” is an integral part of the Robertson family’s language.

As the patriarch of the family, Phil has made more contributions to the family language than anyone else. Another of his phrases is the exclamation, “Now we’re cookin’ with peanut oil!” Phil uses this term to express his approval for something or if he thinks that whatever may be happening is going well. One example of this occurs in the season two episode, “Truck Commander,” in which Jase and two of the family’s employees, Martin and Godwin, have sunk a boat in the river. His father, Phil, sits on the bank as Jase fishes it out and, as the boat begins to rise to the surface, congratulates his son, exclaiming, “Now we’re cookin’ with peanut oil!”

Phil’s phrase is a variation of the popular “Now we’re cooking with gas,” a phrase that was introduced in the early 1900’s (Maney).

Natural gas companies struggled to persuade homeowners to switch from wood or coal stoves to gas stoves…[They] mounted a PR campaign behind the slogan, “Now you're cooking with gas.” By 1930, people saw that the homes of early adopters didn't get blown up, and the ease of the use of gas won out over any remaining safety concerns (Maney).

Both the original phrase and Phil’s variation are examples of figurative language, which is defined as “language that shifts meaning from the primary meaning of the word” (Denham 310). Phil clearly does not intend to state that he is literally cooking food in peanut oil, but means something else entirely, using the phrase as a metaphor. This semantic concept occurs when the “nonliteral meaning of one word or phrase describes another word or phrase” (Denham 312). Thus, cooking with peanut oil adopts the sense of approval and conveys the satisfaction that Phil intends to express.

Another metaphor is employed by Willie Robertson when he refers to people as “son.” As CEO of the family business, Willie is required to oversee the business and ensure that operations run smoothly. To do so, he is forced to assert himself over other members of the family, including older members such as his brother, Jase, and his uncle, Si. As a means of asserting his authority, Willie has developed the habit of referring to people as “son.” One example of this occurs in the episode “Sweatin’ Bullets.” In this instance, the air conditioning has broken in the workroom and Jase is approaching Willie, telling him that it needs to be fixed. Willie’s responds, “Deal with it, son.” In the episode “Battle of the Brothers,” this occurs again when Willie tells Jase, “It’s never too late to start something new, son.” Clearly, Willie is not delusional as to his relationships and doesn’t actually believe his brother is his son. Instead, Willie uses the term solely as an assertion of authority.

In addition to these few terms, the family also uses several distinct colloquialisms in their speech. Merriam-Webster defines colloquialism as “a local or regional dialect.” The Robertson family provides a very small, concentrated area that engages in their very own colloquialisms. The phrase “he gone” was introduced first by Miss Kay and is now used widely throughout the family (Catch Phrases). Originally used by Chicago White Sox commentator, Ken “Hawk” Harrelson, to indicate when a player was out, Miss Kay has not stated whether or not that was where she picked up the phrase. When discussing the term, Korie Robertson states, “’He gone.’ That’s Kay’s. When someone walks out the door, she’ll say, ‘He gone” or ‘They gone’” (Catch Phrases). It is used simply to observe that a person has left the area.

Uncle Si has several catch phrases that he uses in addition to “hey.” One of these is “Jack,” a term that he uses to emphasize his point while addressing anyone, male or female. One example of his use of the term occurs in the episode “Of Mattresses and Men” when Si says, “Hey, it’s either bet big, or go to the house, Jack.” In the season two episode, “Sweatin’ Bullets,” Si remarks, “I ain’t goin’ nowhere, Jack!”

The phrase, “You can’t spell \_\_\_\_\_ without \_\_\_\_\_” is well known in pop culture. Uses include “You can’t spell slaughter without laughter,” “You can’t spell Christmas without Christ,” and “You can’t spell lover without love.” Si puts his own unique spin on the phrase by using it to describe himself. Si uses variations of the “You can’t spell \_\_\_\_\_ without S. I.” term throughout the show to depict himself in a positive light. On such instance occurs in an episode showing the boys picketing the Duck Commander Buck Commander warehouse while on strike, in which Si carries a sign reading “You can’t spell strike without S. I.” (Duck No We Won’t Go). In describing his prowess as a squirrel hunter, Si remarks, “Hey, you can’t even spell squirrel without S. I. and that’s me” (Redneck Logic). Another variation of the phrase was used in the season one episode, “Redneck Roadtrip.” In this episode, Martin uses Si’s catchphrase to insult him, remarking, “You can’t spell stupid without S. I.”

The Robertson family’s language contains many eccentric and unique characteristics that exhibit several concepts in semantics. Si’s interjection, “hey,” displays vagueness while Phil’s phrase, “happy, happy, happy,” is an example of reduplication. The use of the word “yuppie” is indicative of semantic shifts and pejoration, and the phrase, “Now we’re cookin’ with peanut oil!” represents figurative language and metaphors. Si’s terms “Jack” and “You can’t spell \_\_\_\_\_ without S.I.” are examples of extremely concentrated colloquialisms along with Miss Kay’s statement, “He gone.” All of these concepts combine to create the distinct language of the Robertson family.

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