The American sitcom in a Brazilian setting

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Sameness and difference across two nations and languages

Introduction and general background

In order to begin the discussion regarding a sitcom from American television used in a Brazilian classroom, I believe it is necessary to discuss the situation of the world as we know it at the beginning of the 21st century. Using the theories of the Brazilian sociologist Renato Ortiz (1994) as the basis for this discussion, it is possible to differentiate between the terms *global* and *world-systemic* (or *mundial*). In this view, *global* refers to the economic and technological processes at work in the modern day world, while *world-systemic* refers to the domain of culture. The category *world* is linked to the global, but signifies a world-view, a symbolic universe which is specific to the historic moment in which we live (cf. Ortiz, 1994, p. 29).

In this universe there are hierarchies, conflicts and accommodations of meaning. This world-systemic culture is best understood as a process and a totality. As a process it is in constant flux. As a totality it penetrates and redefines the local parts. In this sense, it is not a 'world culture' that is situated hierarchically outside local cultures, but rather a social phenomenon that penetrates all manifestations of culture. For a world-systemic culture to exist, it must become local, forming roots in the everyday lives of people.

Yet, this view does not lead to a homogeneous interpretation of the world-systemic culture. Ortiz (1994, p. 32) argues that the difference between 'cultural patterns' and 'cultural standardization' (the process of producing cultural artefacts) must not be confused. In other words, there is a cultural standardization, a production and serialization of objects in the cultural industry (films, sitcoms, popular music) that shows itself with force in the modern world and means, for example, that it is possible to watch the same films in countries as diverse as China and Brazil. In this world-systemic culture, there are patterns, which Ortiz (1994, p. 33) refers to as 'world-modernity', that establish a new manner of being in the world. As these patterns penetrate individual lives, they are expressed in localized form, establishing new values and new legitimacies. Thus the manner of living world-modernity (that is, the cultural patterns, in for example China and Brazil) will be differentiated, not homogeneous, although the serialized, standardized cultural products may look the same.

The language of this new world system is English. Its capacity to be used in various domains, that is, its transversality, links it to the globalization of modern life. It acts within *a transglossic space*, a term which Ortiz (1994) borrows from Truchot (1990). In this space other languages are not abolished, but used for

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certain specific or restricted purposes. As Truchot (2000) points out, English is used increasingly for academic purposes, for communication within transnational companies and as a part of a standardized worldwide cultural industry.

As a teacher at the Universidade Federal de Goiás, in Brazil, I became increasingly curious as to how my students were interpreting the standardized cultural products with which they came in contact. The questions that came to my mind revolved around whether the students identified with the culture viewed, whether they localized their interpretation of a sitcom or whether they conducted the interpretation in some other way. In other words, how did they interpret a cultural artefact such as an American situation comedy? After reading Ortiz, I felt I had some tools to help me answer these questions. Thus, what I present in the rest of this paper is the students' interpretation of a sitcom they watched in one of my classes.

The classroom

The students were from the fifth-year class of the five-year 'Letras' program at the Universidade Federal de Goiás, Brazil. At the end of the program of studies, the students graduate as accredited teachers of their mother tongue Portuguese and one foreign language. The students can choose from among English, French or Spanish. The seventeen students in my class were those who had chosen English as their foreign language.

In terms of their language level, the students were a heterogeneous group ranging from intermediate to advanced. They were adults from twenty-one to thirty-five years of age. Most were already working as English language teachers in schools throughout the city of Goiânia, in which the university is located. Some were already married and had children. Two of the students had been on a high-school exchange program and had spent a year in the United States. One other student had been on a vacation trip to Disneyland, while another student's husband was an illegal alien living and working in New England. She was planning on joining him there after graduation. The others had never left Brazil.

These students were studying American Literature with me for a total of four hours a week. This subject was mandatory and the class was conducted in English. Our classes were divided into two sections with three hours on one day and one hour on the next day. This was the schedule set by the Faculty. I decided to take advantage of the situation and dedicate the single class hour to discussing their understanding of artefacts of cultural standardization, their view of themselves as cultural beings, and the American culture as they understood it. We did this in three ways: by watching American sitcoms and having an ensuing discussion; by reading texts about American culture written by Americans as well as Brazilians; and by watching documentaries about topics ranging from black/white race relations in the U.S. to biographies of American authors. My general purpose was to find out how my students were understanding and interpreting what they saw and heard. This study was part of a larger research project which focused on the intercultural strategies used in the students' readings of American literature texts (cf. Rees, 2003).

The situation comedy

The American situation comedy, or sitcom, is usually about families or groups of people that act as a family. The idealized American middle-class family, consisting of a mother, a father and two children, serves as the background for the plots and themes. The sitcom can either agree with this view of the family, in which case it can be played out in many variations, or disagree, in which case the family is made a target of criticism and satire (Taflinger, 1996). The sitcom can usually be divided into the following parts:

1 the exposition, in which the characters are presented with the opening credits
2 the problem, which is usually a misunderstanding, a mistake or unforeseen circumstances that disrupt the status quo
3 the complications, which are a result of attempts to solve the problem and constitute a source of humour
4 the crisis, in which the protagonists have to make a decision on about what action to take
5 the climax, which is the high point of the action
6 the denouement, which shows that the status quo has been restored (cf. Tafflinger, 1996)

Since the entire plot from problem to denoue-

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ment takes place in less than thirty minutes, the focus is usually on action and not characterization, and the problems tend to be superficial and easily solved.

The sitcom *Everybody loves Raymond*

The sitcoms used in class were taped from cable television. They were in English with Portuguese subtitles. I did not try to remove the subtitles as they helped complement the students understanding of the English. There were times in which the students detected discrepancies between what was said and what was written in the subtitles.

Everybody loves Raymond focuses on Raymond Barone and his family who live in Long Island, New York. His immediate family consists of his wife Debra and their three children, while across the street from them live his parents and his divorced brother. The particular episode that was watched is about piano lessons. In it, the problem is presented immediately as the credits are rolling. Ray's daughter Ally does not want to continue her piano lessons with her grandmother, Marie, who is upset at this turn of events: 'Fine,' she says, 'we can let it all go. Let it all go. Music. Culture. Civilization.'

Although Debra talks to her daughter and allows her to quit, Ray is worried, as he doesn't want Ally to be a quitter. However, there is a complication. Ray himself quit piano when he was around her age. He quit partly because his father was against piano for boys. He believed that boys should care about sports, not music, and points out that, at the present moment, he makes his living as a sports writer. In the climax, Ray decides to go back to studying piano with his mother in order to be an example to his daughter. In the denouement, Raymond is shown playing the theme from *Love Story* as his family look on. As soon as he is finished, Raymond's father calls, and asks: 'Who wants to play T-ball?' 'I do, I do!' shout the kids, as they run outside leaving Ray and the piano behind. The status quo has been re-established.

The students' interpretation

After watching the sitcom, the students wrote down a summary of the program which included their interpretations of what they had seen. I read these assignments and, using the students' own words as a basis, along with the concepts in Ortiz (1994), devised a three-part categorization:

- statements focusing on national differences
- statements focusing on a world-systemic culture
- statements showing a localized interpretation of the sitcom

The students had individual interpretations and by including a variety of quotes I hoped to show the different types of understandings that appeared in their summaries. The quotes are verbatim, I have made no changes to what the students wrote in English, and I have not used the students' real names.

Statements focusing on national differences

One of the differences noticed by the students was the emphasis on learning the piano. According to Ester, this emphasis 'is a very European and aristocratic way to view music'. In Brazil, learning the piano is for 'the minority of the people'. By using the words *European* and *aristocratic*, Ester in effect places piano lessons outside Brazilian reality and links them with another sphere of life altogether. She sees the American family in the sitcom as being linked to European practices, for she understands the piano as an instrument that is linked specifically to a certain type of music that, in her opinion, originated in Europe. She goes on to say, 'Brazil has a culture of popular music, not of classical music', adding that 'Brazilian music is famous for its originality of rhythms'. By mentioning the question of rhythms, Ester is in fact referring to the African heritage of Brazilian music.

Paulo, on the other hand, focuses on the local lack of formal music teaching. He says, 'Music here in Brazil is taught just in the upper class. A poor person learns music just if this person has a relative or a friend that is a musician.' He adds: 'In the USA, sports and music are accessible to the people since the beginning of the student's life.' Thus, in his viewing of the sitcom, and no doubt because of other previous information, Paulo makes generalized statements about the United States, and sees Brazil in contrast to that country. Brazil is a poorer country in which most people have less access to formal music and sports training than in the USA. By referring to the upper class, he shows

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an awareness of a class system associated with economic reality in which the majority do not have extra money and therefore access to formal lessons.

Several students linked the music and sports mentioned in the sitcom to a way of making money and having success in Brazil. Tina for example says that many parents have come to realize that 'their sons can be very rich through music or sport'. Magda says that 'in Brazil, sports and music are related to status'. Lidia notes that 'some young people give up professions such as doctor, lawyer, teacher searching for quick success. There are a lot of singers, pagode and axé groups popping up recently.' *Pagode* and *axé* are two styles of music that were very popular at the time and had dozens of groups appearing on televised musical programs. These groups were composed of male singers and in the case of *axé* included female dancers. The students said that in Brazil, the division shown in the sitcom, in which sports are for men and music is for women, did not exist. As Max puts it, 'I think there is this kind of belief here that if one makes it in sports or music, so much the better for them. Any kind of prejudice plays second fiddle to money.' In Magda's words, 'When we talk about sport and music in Brazil we are talking about the two biggest passions here.'

As Ester's statement indicates, music in Brazil is basically popular music. She also says: 'I don't think many Brazilian parents expect their children to become pianists, as the lady on the show, and neither to become a professional of gymnastics or karate but if you talk about soccer, all Brazilian parents would probably dream of having a soccer player son, it would be like to win the lottery, literally speaking.'

As we see here, one of the ways in which the students interpreted the sitcom was in terms of national differences. This led to discussions which focused on Brazilian life in relation to American life. Naturally, in doing this, differences within the national contexts disappear and both Brazil and the United States are interpreted as nations that are presented as homogeneous within their national boundaries. The sitcom, in turn, is interpreted as a straightforward depiction of American life and not as a cultural product of American society. It is seen as a window into how Americans think and act. From this, the contrast between 'us' and 'them' appears and becomes solidified in the statements that contrast the two countries.

Statements focusing on a world-systemic culture

There were students who used the adjective *modern* when describing the sitcom's Barone family. According to Ester, 'Raymond is a modern father'. What characterizes this type of father is that he 'tries to participate in his child's education'. João describes the sitcom as showing conflicts that are 'common in modern families'. However, both Ester and João use the word *modern* as inclusive not only of the characters in the sitcom but of themselves as well. It is used as a category that transcends national boundaries.

In Cássia's summary of the sitcom, a paragraph draws a parallel between the Barones and her own family. In it she brings out the category 'modern versus traditional'. She identifies Frank in the sitcom as being traditional and illustrates his traditionalism by telling the class about her grandparents: 'My grandparents (said) that soccer was for boys and the boy who dances or plays instruments like the piano, violin, flute was not 'normal'. He was a gay.' She depicts these views as negative and shows herself as being 'modern' like Marie Barone, who in the past wanted her sons to play the piano. 'Modern' is a characteristic of present-day existence as opposed to 'traditional', which relates to the past and has no value any more. Cássia says, 'Fortunately, the thoughts were changed.' Being modern is therefore nowadays an aspect of life that transcends national boundaries, so that Cássia can identify with Marie and Raymond's attitudes about piano-playing and family values.

Other students identified with the Barones on the basis of their being a family with characteristics that were recognizable. In this way, Eneida said that families in the world are similar: 'full of problems and disagreements.' Marli familiarized the conflict in the Barone family to her own situation as a mother: 'I always try to show to Randolph and Pauline some values as sense of justice, honesty, dignity.' She saw Raymond as acting the way she would: 'Raymond had problems with his father …but because he wanted to show other values to his daughter he decided to take piano's lesson with his mother again.' Eneida and Marli found the American TV family familiar enough to identify and find similarities with. This is part of a familiar cultural reference which Ortiz calls a 'world-systemic memory'.

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In addition, the students showed themselves to be familiar with depictions of American daily life. At no time did they find the program so strange that they were unable to interpret what was taking place. As was pointed out above, the students discussed the American way of doing things in a way which demonstrated their familiarity with this type of cultural product. In other words, they are part of a world-systemic culture in which similar products circulate throughout the world.

Statements focusing on localized interpretations

Throughout the sitcom, Raymond Barone is concerned about his daughter being a quitter. In the second scene, when Raymond disagrees with Ally quitting he says, 'What if she's great at piano. You've got to stick to stuff. You don't quit after three lessons. Did I quit asking you to marry me after three rejections? No. You don't get anywhere if you quit. I don't want Alley to be like that.' And in Scene 3, Raymond and Debra are in bed discussing the matter, where they say:

DEBRA I know you feel bad about Ally.
RAYMOND How could I tell her not to quit?
DEBRA When you're a quitter?
RAYMOND Thanks.

It is in this scene that Debra suggests that he take more lessons so as to be an example to his daughter and so, in Scene 4, Raymond asks his mother for more lessons.

In spite of this emphasis on being a quitter, the students at no time mentioned the concept. To them Raymond was being a good father by helping his daughter. As Ester puts it, Raymond is a father who 'tries to set a good example'. Lídia, in her written summary, says: 'At night Raymond confessed to his wife that he liked to play the piano and would like to encourage his daughter.' Raymond is interpreted as a parent who wishes to help his child, but there is no mention of the reason for this, that is, trying to teach Ally not to be a quitter. Estela makes a similar statement, 'Raymond wants to encourage his daughter in piano's lessons and he goes back to learn piano to give the example to her.' And finally, Rita says, 'Raymond and his wife are encouraging their older daughter to learn how to play the piano.'

The emphasis in these statements is on being an example and an encouragement to Ally. The ignoring of the term *quitter* could be because this cultural domain does not seem to exist in the students' version of Brazilian culture. The term is certainly very hard to translate. I would say the emphasis in Brazil is more on being a *guerreiro* ('fighter'), someone who never gives up (*não desistir*). The first term, *quitter*, emphasizes the negative qualities in someone who does not persist, whereas the second issues, being a fighter and not giving up, emphasize persistence. In other words, the two types of terms deal with natural events and choices that occur in people's lives and involve the decision to keep on or give up, but they conceptualize these events and choices in slightly different ways. Thus, the students ignored the reason for which Raymond decides to take up piano again (to help Ally not to be a quitter) and interpreted the sitcom in more familiar, localized terms (as a story of fatherly encouragement).

In addition, the students interpreted Marie Barone in a familiar, localized manner. Throughout the sitcom, she is presented as having a very strong personality and as being a source of a lot of the humour in the story. In the second scene, Debra asks: 'Ally, do you want to tell mommy what's wrong? Does grandma scare you?' To which Ally responds that no, she just finds piano boring.

In Scene 4, when Raymond is asking his mother for piano lessons, Marie is constantly criticizing his life choice to work in sports:

RAYMOND Listen ma, I'm sorry.
MARIE No, no. I'm the one who's sorry. I shouldn't expect you to remember all those things. I overreacted. It's just that…
RAYMOND What?
MARIE Sports is so stupid. Who would have ever dreamed I'd have a child who'd end up in sports?

Later on Marie says to Raymond, 'Just know you could've been someone.' And at one point, Raymond comments on his mother's statements, 'The only amazing thing is that I can function at all.'

The students, however, did not interpret Marie negatively. Rita says, 'This episode shows us funny and interesting scenes that expresses family's links and habits like the "Brazilian" relation between mother and son… Raymond has a kind of protective mother.' Thus the strong relationship between Raymond and Marie, which in an American setting could be seen as negative, is described as

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Brazilian, that is, a typical familiar mother–son relationship.

In other cases, the grandmother is seen positively, as in Ester's words, 'The grandmother is very sensitive and emotional, a kind of old fashionable lady.' Thus Marie's crying and hugging Raymond are interpreted positively as a sign of sensitivity. Tina, for her part, points out that the Barones are of Italian descent, 'They are descendents of Italian people. They love and hate in the same way. Specially the mother. She loves and screems a lot.' In the stereotype about the emotional Italians, love is a strong component and according to Tina is a characteristic of Marie. She loves a lot.

Conclusion

As has been shown in the above examples, the students accept the world in the sitcom as possible and worthy of discussion. In other words, standardized cultural artefacts are a part of their lives and do not cause strangeness.

Yet the students have specific ways of interpreting different aspects of the sitcom, as indicated above. There are moments in which national characteristics are referred to as a means of comparison and of understanding certain actions that take place within the sitcom. The emphasis is on an *us/them* contrastive view. At other moments, the *us/them* dichotomy collapses and the students are at one with the ideas of the sitcom. In other words, it is at this moment they show themselves to be part of world-modernity, a new manner of being in the world. This is exemplified especially in the use of the word *modern* itself, through which the students identify with the characters of the sitcom as if they were all members of the same community. And finally, there are localized interpretations in which certain aspects of the sitcom are ignored and others are familiarized. In this way, the sitcom has been accommodated to fit local meanings.

Throughout the three types of interpretation, new values and new legitimacies are created: the legitimacy of discussing the American way of life as an Other which exists as a kind of mirror image to be referred to; the legitimacy of being modern and everything that that entails in terms of concepts and values in everyday life; and the legitimacy of reaffirming localized identities in the light of world-systemic cultural artefacts.

In this paper, I discussed and described what can happen when students in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom come in contact with a culturally standardized foreign product and then exhibit particular cultural patterns when interpreting it together. In doing this, I hope to contribute to the discussion of how meaning is constructed in the contemporary world. ■

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