

How to Speak and Write Postmodern

by Stephen Katz, Associate Professor, Sociology,
Trent University, Peterborough, Ontario, Canada.

Postmodernism has been the buzzword in academia for the last decade. Books, journal articles, conference themes and university courses have resounded to the debates about postmodernism that focus on the uniqueness of our times, where computerization, the global economy and the media have irrevocably transformed all forms of social engagement. As a professor of sociology who teaches about culture, I include myself in this environment. Indeed, I have a great interest in postmodernism both as an intellectual movement and as a practical problem. In my experience there seems to be a gulf between those who see the postmodern turn as a neo-conservative reupholstering of the same old corporate trappings, and those who see it as a long overdue break with modernist doctrines in education, aesthetics and politics. Of course there are all kinds of positions in between, depending upon how one sorts out the optimum route into the next millennium.

However, I think the real gulf is not so much positional as linguistic. Posture can be as important as politics when it comes to the intelligentsia. In other words, it may be less important whether or not you like postmodernism than whether or not you can speak and write postmodernism. Perhaps you would like to join in conversation with your local mandarins of cultural theory and all-purpose deep thinking, but you don't know what to say. Or, when you do contribute something you consider relevant, even insightful, you get ignored or looked at with pity. Here is a quick guide, then, to speaking and writing postmodern.

First, you need to remember that plainly expressed language is out of the question. It is too realist, modernist and obvious. Postmodern language requires that one uses play, parody and indeterminacy as critical techniques to point this out. Often this is quite a difficult requirement, so obscurity is a well-acknowledged substitute. For example, let's imagine you want to say something like, "We should listen to the views of people outside of Western society in order to learn about the cultural biases that affect us". This is honest but dull. Take the word "views". Postmodernspeak would change that to "voices", or better, "vocalities", or even better, "multivocalities". Add an adjective like "intertextual", and you're covered. "People outside" is also too plain. How about "postcolonial others"? To speak postmodern properly one must master a bevy of biases besides the familiar racism, sexism, ageism, etc.

For example, phallogocentrism (male-centredness combined with rationalistic forms of binary logic). Finally "affect us" sounds like plaid pajamas. Use more obscure verbs and phrases, like "mediate our identities". So, the final statement should say, "We should listen to the intertextual, multivocalities of postcolonial others outside of Western culture in order to learn about the phallogocentric biases that mediate our identities". Now you're talking postmodern!

Sometimes you might be in a hurry and won't have the time to muster even the minimum number of postmodern synonyms and neologisms needed to avoid public disgrace. Remember, saying the wrong thing is acceptable if you say it the right way. This brings me

to a second important strategy in speaking postmodern, which is to use as many suffixes, prefixes, hyphens, slashes, underlinings and anything else your computer (an absolute must to write postmodern) can dish out. You can make a quick reference chart to avoid time delays. Make three columns. In column A put your prefixes; post-, hyper-, pre-, de-, dis-, re-, ex-, and counter-. In column B go your suffixes and related endings; -ism, -itis, -iality, -ation, -itivity, and -tricity. In column C add a series of well-respected names that make for impressive adjectives or schools of thought, for example, Barthes (Barthesian), Foucault (Foucauldian, Foucauldianism), Derrida (Derridean, Derrideanism).

Now for the test. You want to say or write something like, “Contemporary buildings are alienating”. This is a good thought, but, of course, a non-starter. You wouldn’t even get offered a second round of crackers and cheese at a conference reception with such a line. In fact, after saying this, you might get asked to stay and clean up the crackers and cheese after the reception. Go to your three columns. First, the prefix. Pre- is useful, as is post-, or several prefixes at once is terrific. Rather than “contemporary buildings”, be creative. “The Pre/post/spacialities of counter-architectural hyper-contemporaneity” is promising. You would have to drop the weak and dated term “alienating” with some well suffixed words from column B. How about “antisociality”, or be more postmodern and introduce ambiguity with the linked phrase, “antisociality/seductivity”.

Now, go to column C and grab a few names whose work everyone will agree is important and hardly anyone has had the time or the inclination to read. Continental European theorists are best when in doubt. I recommend the sociologist Jean Baudrillard since he has written a great deal of difficult material about postmodern space. Don’t forget to make some mention of gender. Finally, add a few smoothing out words to tie the whole garbled mess together and don’t forget to pack in the hyphens, slashes and parentheses. What do you get? “Pre/post/spacialities of counter-architectural hyper-contemporaneity (re)commits us to an ambivalent recurrentiality of antisociality/seductivity, one enunciated in a de/gendered-Baudrillardian discourse of granulated subjectivity”. You should be able to hear a postindustrial pin drop on the retrocultural floor.

At some point someone may actually ask you what you’re talking about. This risk faces all those who would speak postmodern and must be carefully avoided. You must always give the questioner the impression that they have missed the point, and so send another verbose salvo of postmodernspeak in their direction as a “simplification” or “clarification” of your original statement. If that doesn’t work, you might be left with the terribly modernist thought of, “I don’t know”. Don’t worry, just say, “The instability of your question leaves me with several contradictorily layered responses whose interconnectivity cannot express the logocentric coherency you seek. I can only say that reality is more uneven and its (mis)representations more untrustworthy than we have time here to explore”. Any more questions? No, then pass the cheese and crackers.