As the UAE is still abuzz with the opening of the Burj Khalifa, I thought a post to mark the occasion might be in order. Seeing that I’m blogging on social aspects of multilingualism and language learning, the Tower of Babel myth obviously comes to mind – except that it seems a bit premature to tell the story of human hubris in relation to the world’s latest superlative in towers. It is another connection that intrigues me: the Burj Khalifa is obviously a monument to global consumption and luxurious materialism in a similar fashion that the Ancient Egyptian pyramids were monuments to the afterlife or the Gothic cathedrals were monuments to God’s glory.

If we accept that consumption has become the key driver of our age, it doesn’t come as a surprise either that consumption is inspiring art in the way that death and religion used to inspire art. The art inspired by consumption is, of course, called advertising. Multilingual advertising is a fascinating site for research into language ideologies and the ways in which languages and their speakers are (de)valued in one of the most hegemonic discourses that is around. I did a couple of studies of the use of languages other than German in German advertising in the late 1990s, all of which are available from our Resources Section. They are all a bit dated by now but an overview of language contact in international advertising which sketches future research directions for the field and which I did for the Annual Review of Applied Linguistics in 2003 (and which is also there) isn’t.

In that paper I was suggesting that a sociolinguistics of advertising needed to move beyond mere descriptivism in order to make a meaningful contribution to the social sciences. In particular, I was calling for investigations of the role of multilingual advertising in making corporatism appear benign, and obscure the neo-colonial and exploitative social structures that ultimately make the kind of hyper-consumption we are witnessing today possible. To quote myself:

At a time when the values, tastes, and industrial practices of American brands are being exported to every corner of the globe, there is a simultaneous attempt to distance these brands — symbolically—from America. One way of doing so may be to use languages other than English in their advertising. The indexing of heterogeneity through the use of multilingual advertising, particularly by U.S. brands, at a time when these very brands rely upon homogeneous consumption practices for their profits, looks set to be another intriguing area of research for linguists working with language contact phenomena in advertising (2003, p. 177)

So far, no one seems to have taken the bait. The challenge still stands, though, as does Naomi Klein’s analysis of diversity marketing on which I was drawing:

Today the buzzword in global marketing isn’t selling America to the world, but bringing a kind of market masala to everyone in the world. In the late nineties, the pitch is less Marlboro Man, more Ricky Martin: a bilingual mix of North and South, some Latin, some R&B, all couched in global party lyrics. This ethnic-food-court approach creates a One World placelessness, a global mall in which corporations are able to sell a single product in numerous countries without triggering the cries of “Coca-Colonization.” (No Logo, 2001, p. 131f.)