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Speech and the Communal Function in Four Cultures

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This chapter argues that each culture provides a distinctive way to perform the communal function, that is, to use communication as a means for linking individuals into communities of shared identity. The use of communication in the creation, affirmation, and negotiation of shared identity is discussed through a review of the special role of speech in four cultural communities.

The long history of communication study is marked by an enduring concern with how symbolic action can serve the needs of individuals and societies. Typically, this concern has been directed to the informative, persuasive, aesthetic, and heuristic functions of communication. Recently, increased attention has been paid to the communal function—that is, to communication as a means for linking individuals into communities of shared identity. Eastman (1985) refers to communal identity as the achievement of "subjective social identity and community membership" (p. 5). She is concerned with how (a) shared attitudes, (b) knowledge and use of culturally specific vocabulary, and (c) competence to speak about context-sensitive topics are efficacious for individuals in such achievements. Philipsen (1987) has defined this as the cultural function of communication, the use of communication in the creation, affirmation, and negotiation of shared identity (p. 249). His emphasis is on the individual's knowledge and use of community-specific discursive forms such as episodic sequences, stories, and aligning actions as sources of insight into and models for situated communal practice. Such approaches have in common a concern with how the individual's understanding and use of linguistic behavior function in the process of identifying the individual with a social group.

Ong (1982) has pointed to the special role of speech, the use of language in social situations, in performing the communal function:

> Because in its physical constitution as sound, the spoken word proceeds from the human interior and manifests human beings to one another as conscious interiors, as persons, the spoken word forms human beings into close-knit groups. (p. 74)

Ong's statement is a stimulus for this essay, as a source of inspiration and as a point of contention. It inspires the strategy of inquiring into the cultural function of communication—the examination of how speech, one important medium of communication, joins individuals into communities of shared identity. But so much of what has been learned in the empirical study of speech behavior suggests that *how* speech functions, in lives and societies, *varies* across speech communities (Hymes, 1962, 1972). Thus Ong's statement prompts me to ask: What can be learned about the communal function of speech by studying it in diverse societies?

For the past several years a group of investigators has been studying different cultures and how speaking functions within them. For each of these four cultures the available data include a completed doctoral dissertation plus a book or published papers. Each study involved one or more years of intensive fieldwork in a speech community, with the aim of discovering and describing cultural symbols and meanings, premises, and rules pertaining to speaking. Although the studies were not explicitly or exclusively directed to the communal function, each member of the group has been concerned with the themes developed in Philipsen (1987) and, thus, each study includes some data that are pertinent to the question raised in this essay.

An important feature of each of the projects reviewed here is its use of an ethnography of speaking model (Hymes, 1962). This is a model of description that directs the investigator to study communities of discourse in terms of their distinctive systems of resources and rules pertaining to communicative conduct. Of particular importance is the discovery and description of culturally shaped "ways of speaking" (Hymes, 1974), a term that joins the Whorfian idea of "fashions of speaking" with the commonsense notion of ways of life. It is assumed that the spoken life of various people is so richly varied that knowledge of how spoken life is conceptualized, enacted, and interpreted in a given community is a matter of empirical investigation.

Although the ethnographer of speaking treats a culture as *sui generis* (i.e., as its own thing), assumptions and procedures are used heuristically in the study of a given culture. An assumption guiding

the projects summarized here is that cultural premises and rules about speaking are intricately tied up with cultural conceptions of persons, agency, and social relations—that is, rules and beliefs about speech articulate with a larger cultural code defining the nature of persons, whether and how it is that humans can act efficaciously in the world of practice, and what are the possible and appropriate ways in which individuals are linked together in social units. In this sense a code of speaking is a code of personhood and society as well.

SPEAKING IN PLACE IN TEAMSTERVILLE

The following have been observed as patterns in Teamsterville culture (Philipsen, 1972, 1975, 1976, 1986):

(1) the expression of a belief that neighborhood speech practices—and therefore the speaker's speech—are substandard in relation to the mainstream speech of American society, accompanied by an aggressive persistence in the use of the neighborhood practices and the aggressive negative sanctioning of neighborhood residents who deviate from neighborhood practices;

(2) a reluctance on the part of community members to engage in conversation with persons who live outside the four-block space of the speech community and, within the community, a restriction of the spoken part of one's life to meetings of groups of people with whom the interlocutor shares the identity features of age, gender, ethnicity, and location of residence (usually defined in terms of an area of approximately one city block);

(3) the practice of infusing a concern with "place" in every speech episode, such that descriptions of others, attributions of intent to self and others, and decisions about whether and how to interact with others are consistently and systematically expressed in terms of ethnicity, residence, and gender; and

(4) the belief that speech is an efficacious resource for affirming and enacting ties of solidarity and that it is, for ordinary community members, inefficacious in economic and political assertions, such as in making a living and in disciplining children.

These beliefs and practices can be summarized in terms of the idea of "place" as a fundamental theme and motive in Teamsterville spoken life. Teamstervillers perceive the world as being shaped by a

finely developed sense of place. They see boundaries, social and physical, where some others do not, and this vision serves a major unifying perception in their worldview. The centrality of place in the cultural outlook is reflected in a strong concern for locating people in social-physical space, in a view of places as locales whose boundaries rightly enclose and shelter some people and deny entry to others, and in a pervasive concern that oneself and others know and stay in their proper place both hierarchically and socially.

How, in such a social world, is the cultural function performed? Taken from the perspective of the individual speaker, the following can be specified. The use of the neighborhood style of speaking is one obvious practical act that can be performed by individuals to instantiate "subjective social identity and community membership" (Eastman, 1985, p. 5). Each time a speaker speaks in the neighborhood style, that speaker performs an act of identification; she or he identifies with the social group by using a way of speaking that historically has defined that group. It is historical in that the practice is handed down from generation to generation and in that there are written reports, widely publicized, about the neighborhood speech style. These widely publicized reports make at least a superficial knowledge of Teamsterville speech ways a part of the larger common culture of Chicago.

The use of the neighborhood speech style is an act of identification in two mutually reinforcing ways. First, it is an act by which the speaker "gives off" to others the impression that the speaker is a member, is "from around here" and "belongs around here." That is, as directed to one's interlocutors the use of neighborhood speech makes an identity claim. Second, it is an act by which speakers themselves hear their own speech as similar to the speech of a particular group of others. Thus, the use of neighborhood speech is an act in which one experiences oneself as a member. Taking both ways together, such acts of speech are powerful acts of what I call "membering"—a word that captures something that the verbs *enact, announce, affirm, establish,* and the like do not quite express alone.

A second principle governing membering through language use in Teamsterville is that the person must spend a great deal of time in sociable interaction among a group of people with whom the person has a matched social identity—matched in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, and residence. The purpose of such groups is "to hang together in times of fun and trouble" for the sake of pure association. It is in

the company of such a group that the member feels most alive, most "a person," as some outsiders might say.

In Teamsterville culture the model person is a *persona*, that is, a person with a specified set of social attributes, who is acting out his or her prescribed role among a specified *dramatis personae*. The model person has a place and is in place. Speech activity through which the speaker signals that he or she is in the proper place is efficacious in expressing to others and in affirming to the speaker the identification of the speaker with the group. The key principles of action by which such membering is accomplished are (a) the use of the local, nonstandard dialect and (b) being copresent with others of one's own cohorts.

EXPRESSING ONESELF IN NACIREMA CULTURE

Shortly after completing the Teamsterville fieldwork, I initiated a long-term study of mainstream American culture. *American culture* here refers to the system of symbols and premises that has been reported in such well-known studies as those of Varenne (1977) and Yankelovich (1982). Using Horace Miner's well-known term, I refer to this as Nacirema culture (*Nacirema* is *American* spelled backward).

One of the core themes that stimulated our group's studies of Nacirema culture is the idea of the deep structure of a Nacirema communal event. It was my intent to formulate the underlying principles of speaking operative in a speech event in which Nacirema interlocutors would experience a sense of "subjective social identity and community membership" (Eastman, 1985, p. 5). These principles can be expressed as follows: (a) Every individual in the event should be given a period of time to say to the group whatever it is that is of concern to the individual, and (b) it is the responsibility of all individuals to be attentive to what each other individual expressed during his or her turn to talk.

In an unpublished study conducted in 1975, Mary Jo Rudd and I investigated rules for speaking in middle-class families in a community in Southern California. We observed and listened intently to tape recordings of Nacirema conversation at family "dinner time," a speech event in which the participants relentlessly insisted that all family members be allowed a turn at talk—because each person "has something to contribute." We found that the people we observed believed strongly that one's place in the family, defined by a role,

such as "father," should not be a basis for interrupting or curtailing the speech of others because each person's utterance is believed to be uniquely valuable. For these Nacirema individuals, speech is a way to express one's psychological uniqueness, to acknowledge the uniqueness of others, and to bridge the gap between one's own and another's uniqueness; it is a means by which family members, for example, can manifest their equality and demonstrate that they pay little heed to differences in status—practices and beliefs that would puzzle and offend a proper Teamsterviller.

In Seattle, Washington, five years later, Tamar Katriel and I listened to many Nacirema tell their life stories—stories in which great moral weight was placed upon interpersonal "relationships." Each party was not only free, but also felt a sense of pressure, to express and celebrate her or his uniqueness and to explore and understand the other's distinctive individuality. This was manifested most sharply in what we came to call the "communication ritual," a structured sequence of communicative acts in which intimate partners take turns disclosing difficulties experienced with self and relationship. In the ideal version of the ritual, both interlocutors disclose and listen intently to the disclosures of the other. If both parties are close (disclosive), supportive (of the other's "real self"), and flexible (willing to change their view of self or other in the face of interpersonal "feedback"), then the ideal is further realized.

"Dinner time" and the "communication ritual" are speech events whose rule structure and associated beliefs illustrate what I had proposed as the deep structure of a Nacirema speech event in which individuals experienced a sense of social identification through the use of language. Of course, each of these is an intimate, not a communal, event, but this intimate ideal is being pressed as the ideal for other, more communal, relationships; that is, it is being transferred to, or imposed upon, the public domain (see Sennett, 1978). The transference of this deep structure from the intimate to the public domain is revealed in an application of the structure to a prominent Nacirema public scene, the television talk show *Donahue*, hosted by Phil Donahue.

Katriel and Philipsen (1981) introduced the idea that *Donahue* is a public ritual that expresses and affirms core North American concepts and values pertaining to personhood, society, and communication. It is a widely-viewed, and widely-understood, enactment of an episodic sequence that is meaningful to bearers of Nacirema culture.

It displays an episodic sequence by which interlocutors can experience a sense of subjective identity and community membership, a sense that can be vicariously experienced by those viewers who are code bearers.

Carbaugh (1984, 1987) has presented a detailed analysis and interpretation of the culture displayed on *Donahue*. One part of that culture is a system of communication rules, invoked on the show, which he articulates as follows:

- *Rule 1:* In the conversations of *Donahue*, (a) the presentation of "self" is the preferred communication activity, and (b) statements of personal opinions count as proper "self" presentations.
- *Rule 2:* Interlocutors must grant speakers the moral "right" to present "self" through opinions.
- *Rule 3:* The presentation of "self" through opinions should be "respected," that is, tolerated as a rightful expression.
- *Rule 4:* Asserting standards that are explicitly transindividual, or societal, is dispreferred since such assertions are heard (a) to constrain the preferred presentations of "self" unduly, (b) to infringe upon the "rights" of others, and (c) to violate the code of proper respect.

These rules for self-presentation on *Donahue* reflect important features of the culture displayed on that show. One is an emphasis on the existential and moral standing of the "self" as a distinctive, autonomous, and powerful but delicate entity. A second is the importance placed on attentiveness to the distinctiveness of others. A third is the insistence that "society" not be allowed to constrain "self," as reflected in Rule 4, which proscribes the use of transindividual standards for inhibiting or evaluating individual expression. To speculate on how Carbaugh's findings apply to the present concern, I propose that when a Nacirema participates in a speech event in which she or he hears self and others following these rules, that is a point at which membering is experienced.

The *Donahue* rule structure, like the rule structure of family dinner time and of the communication ritual, is a particular expression of the more general, underlying deep structure, posited above, for Nacirema speech events in which the communal function is performed. One contribution of Carbaugh's study is to show this culture at work in a public speech event that is widely experienced as intelligible and consequential in American society.

In Nacirema culture, the model person is a unique *self* whose uniqueness is expressed and affirmed in and through "communication" (close, supportive, flexible speech) with others. "Communication," as a culturally defined way of speaking, constitutes a dialogic relationship in which the self not only is expressed but is actively engaged in the other's experience of the speaker and of a distinctive other. The ideal social relationship is one constituted by dialogic commitments rather than one defined by a set of transpersonal, historically determined expectations. To experience a sense of shared identity, from the standpoint of this code, requires speech events in which these central values and beliefs about persons, social relationships, and communication are articulated and affirmed. Such events are those in which the individuals experience themselves and others expressing their distinctive selves, and in which, they experience themselves and others aggressively attending to the distinctiveness of others' selves.

ISRAELI DUGRI SPEECH

In her ethnographic study of Israeli ways of speaking, Katriel (1983, 1986) has systematically described and interpreted the cultural meanings of *dugri* speech, translated from the Hebrew as straight or direct talk. She specifies its cultural meanings in terms of five dimensions—as sincere, assertive, natural, solidary, and matter-of-fact speech. It involves speech acts in which one person confronts another in such a way as to display images of honesty, in the sense of being true to one's feelings; of assertiveness, in the sense of strength or determination to express a view that is unpalatable to the hearer; of naturalness, in the sense of spontaneous, simple, unadorned speech; of solidarity, in the sense of suspending roles and rules in the creation of egalitarian, undifferentiated, individuating relations; and matter-of-factness or antistyle, in the sense of a preference for deeds over words.

Dugri is a way of speaking intimately bound up with the subculture of the Sabras, native-born Israelis of Jewish heritage, mainly of European descent. "To speak dugri," as one of Katriel's informants put it, "is to act like a Sabra." The Sabra represents the construction, in Israel, of a new Jew who had "come to the Land of Israel to build and be both personally and communally rebuilt in it" (Katriel, 1986,

p. 17). Sabras, the children of pioneers settling in a new Jewish state, developed a unique culture that features a rejection of the genteel European culture from which they were descended and, in particular, of the European Jews' way of relating to the larger European society, a way characterized by defensiveness, restrictiveness, and passivity as an adaptive mechanism.

It is in the spirit of the Sabra cultural agenda that the dugri way of speaking can be understood as communal speech. That agenda consists of the building, in Israel, of a new Jewish identity as well as a new Jewish society that can stand strong in opposition to external forces of various kinds, including externally imposed standards of evaluation and conduct. The new Jew would be productive in labor and would strive to create a just and egalitarian society. Dugri speech, which consists of one person speaking to another in such a way as to suspend the usual requirements of politeness and decorum associated with their role relationship, enacts this cultural agenda symbolically. Its sincerity, in speaking from the heart, reveals the speaker in his or her fundamental humanness; its assertiveness enacts a commitment to shake off the stance of passivity; its naturalness flaunts convention and artifice; its solidariness thematizes the ideal of building a society; and its matter-of-factness underlines the desire to take people, things, and conditions as they are.

Where it is enacted, talking dugri is a powerful way for Sabras to experience a subjective sense of shared identity and community membership. It is in such moments that speaker and listener can project and reaffirm their identity as Sabras.

Images of personhood, society, and communication are expressed in the cultural meanings of dugri speech. Society is elevated in dugri to a position of paramount importance, a position that necessarily, even happily, is superior to the individual person. The individual is stripped of any pretension to preciousness and fragility, as in the Nacirema code, but is, like the Nacirema person, characterized in terms of equality with and differentiation from others. But the Sabra person is not, like the Nacirema person, defended or protected from the restraining forces of society—rather, the Sabra's rationale for living is, to a great degree, his or her potential for serving and, in and through his or her social life, constituting the new Israeli society. Dugri speech symbolizes how individuals can, ideally, be linked together in social ties: The speaker, in flaunting the conventions associated with the old society, in suspending the conventional procedures

for treating individuals with the respect for which the old code qualified them by virtue of their achieved or ascribed status, "disassociates himself from a given structural relationship or social paradigm, while at the same time asserting a deeper affiliation with a more basic and encompassing one" (Katriel, 1986, p. 66).

COMMUNAL SPEECH IN AN APPALACHIAN COMMUNITY

The affirmation and construction of communal ties is an important function of speech in the Appalachian community of Bond, Kentucky, studied by George B. Ray (1983, 1987). On the basis of ethnographic participant observation for a period of two years, Ray described in detail the structure of the community's prominent speech situations and speech events, with an eye to interpreting the means and meanings of speech to residents of Bond. The practice of "huddling," the speech situations of "porch talk" and "supper," and the community ideals of egalitarianism and respect all contribute to a cultural pattern of speaking that has specific implications for the communal function of speech.

One of the most striking features of the community's social life is the expressed desire "to experience life with others" (Ray, 1983, p. 167). To experience life with others, for a member of the Bond speech community, requires people (a) to be together in the same scene and (b) to signal to others that one is "all right." The signaling of one's own and the experiencing of others' being "all right" is effected through many tactics and realized in many different speech events.

"Huddling" in Bond suggests a key to understanding communal speech there. Huddling means that people get together to talk in small public or private gatherings. Huddling groups consist of interlocutors who are well known to each other, such as close friends or family, but are not necessarily segregated as to age or gender. The basic rules of huddling are that no one should speak too much, no one should do anything to upset others, one should appear reserved and modest, and one should not exaggerate. Perhaps the fundamental rule of huddling is that each participant give her- or himself up to the experience of simply "passing the time" with others, with no instrumental agenda or purpose. The ideal of huddling is realized to the extent that each participant makes of the event no more and no less than phatic communion.

The enactment of huddling and of "passing the time" is illustrated in several different speech situations, including "porch talk" and family "supper." In the former, there is an implicit episodic sequence of four steps: (a) Participants inquire about each other's overall condition ("You all right today?"), (b) there is an extended period of general conversation about topics of local interest (neighbors, weather, crops), (c) leave-taking is negotiated, and (d) leaving is consummated. The sequence provides for unlimited time to be together and is begun with an inquiry into the well-being of each participant, thus satisfying the key criteria for a huddling event in Chestnut Flat.

Family supper is an event in which the family is together. It is not necessary that serious discussion takes place. Although there is not, in Bond, evidence for the Nacirema concern that every person takes a turn at talk, there is a concern, particularly on the part of parents, that everyone be together so that the parents can reassure themselves that everyone is "all right." This is manifested in (a) presence at the meal time, (b) the general physical appearance of the child, and (c) whether or not the child eats the usual portion of food. As one of Ray's (1983) adult informants said about going to the parents' home to have supper with them:

> I think when we go there [home] you don't have to say a lot. If you see each other, you know if they are well, if they are sick or have a cold. Mom always said, "You look so thin. Have you been sick?" It doesn't take long. Just to look at you and make sure you are all right. It doesn't matter if you stay long or not. It's just the effect to be there and see them. (p. 171)

The Bond code of persons emphasizes the essential equality of persons as well as the importance of "respect" for the feelings and well-being of others. Particular, known individuals are vitally important to social life because they are the personnel for one of the community's fundamentally important social processes, huddling, and thus important communication processes are devoted primarily to discovering and verifying that one's present, and potentially future, interlocutors are "all right." In moments of sociation in which one experiences life with others, for its own sake, without the intrusion of other mental, emotional, or linguistic tasks, the residents of Bond enact a fundamentally communal sequence of actions. Thus it is in

such moments that one experiences a subjective sense of social identity and community membership. For the individual in Bond, then, the strategy for performing the communal function consists of the following injunctions: (a) Spend time in the presence of other known interlocutors; (b) during such time spent together, devote oneself primarily to the "task" of being together without imposing any purpose that would compete with the phatic one; (c) engage in those acts that would signal attentiveness to the well-being of others and that would signal one's own well-being; and (d) modulate one's own linguistic action (safe topics, no exaggeration, appear reserved) so as to avoid engaging in any activity that would disturb the equanimity of the interlocutors, and thus of the occasion.

CONCLUSION

This survey of ways of speaking in four cultures has revealed four culturally different ways of using speech so as to experience a subjective sense of social identity and community membership. These ways of speaking differ in terms of what they implicate about cultural views of persons, society, and speech, and these views are linked to culture-specific episodic sequences for performing the communal function of speech.

Teamsterville culture defines the person as a social persona, in terms of an achieved or ascribed social identity. Society in this culture is the arrangement of persons in hierarchical and socially segmented relationships. Speech that reveals and reinforces the speaker's place in the social structure is efficacious, in Teamsterville culture, for performing the communal function.

In Nacirema culture the differentiated, unique self is of intrinsic value. Selves can be joined together in appropriate social relations by using speech that unites essentially disparate selves in interpersonal relationships. Bearers of this culture can experience themselves as social beings in those moments in which interlocutors achieve a sense of reciprocal disclosure of self and attentiveness to the disclosures of others.

Israeli Sabra culture emphasizes the importance of individual acts that reject the inherited culture of class relations and domination and that affirm the equality of persons in a newly created society. The self in such a culture is viewed as strong enough to create a strong society,

in concert with other selves, and as something that is strong enough to be suppressed, ignored, or checked in the service of the new society. Society is sufficiently important and sufficiently delicate that it requires selves who will, through their assertive, self-effacing actions, act so as to strengthen the society against any actual or potential threats. A bearer of this culture experiences a subjective sense of social identity precisely in those moments of symbolic affirmation of the social over the personal good.

In Bond the individual self is most fully alive in the company of others who are attentive to the person's well-being. Social experiences are most satisfying that bring interlocutors together for the experience of being in the company of fellows who wish one well. The individual is most likely to experience him- or herself as socially linked with others in those moments in which self and others have given up themselves to a period of extended copresence, without the intrusion of an instrumental agenda and with framing acts of attentiveness to the well-being of individuals present and the equanimity of the group.

These studies suggest that each of the four cultures reviewed here includes culture-specific episodic sequences for experiencing a subjective sense of social identity and community membership. This finding is consistent with the thesis advanced by Philipsen (1987) that each culture provides a distinctive way to perform the communal function. The implication of this is that although Ong's (1982) thesis that speech unites humans into groups is supported by the data reviewed here, Ong's thesis is seriously qualified in the light of cross-cultural data that suggest that *how* speech performs the communal function is subject to considerable cultural variation.

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