THE DISCURSIVE EMERGENCE OF THE CULTURAL ACTOR: COMMENTARY ON HE, KANG, AND LO

Bonnie Urciuoli

Abstract

This commentary compares and discusses the ways that discourse analyses by He, Kang and Lo, this volume, demonstrate the indexical, contingent, complex and ongoing nature of cultural process, manifest at the micro-level of ordinary interaction.

Keywords: Indexicality, Emergent identity, Cultural process

1. Culture and indexicality

In what ways is a person a cultural actor? How does the process of being and becoming a cultural actor manifest itself in ordinary discourse? How does one analyze such discourse to demonstrate that process? These questions lie at the heart of the three papers under discussion here: Agnes Weiyun He's "Identity Construction in Chinese Heritage Language Classes," M. Agnes Kang's "Constructing Ethnic Identity Through Discourse: Self-Categorization Among Korean American Camp Counselors," and Adrienne Lo's "Evidentiality and Morality in a Korean Heritage Language School."

Culture is much too easily and ordinarily imagined as a *thing*, a mysteriously objectified and static given that governs people's actions and loyalties; in short, a sort of fetish. It makes better sense to understand culture as a process in which people participate, a process through which people interactively make sense of a shared world.[1] As work in the past two decades has shown, cultural processes are by no means inherently bounded or harmonious and people routinely (and increasingly) occupy complex cultural landscapes.[2] It is no surprise that cultural identity emerges from interaction as a form of personhood, and that such personhood is routinely contingent and subject to contestation. Discourse provides a readily accessible manifestation of interaction, and the analysis of discourse thus provides insight into cultural process. The interactive and discursive elements analyzed in these papers - role relations, pronoun usage, speech acts and discursive functions - are points where cultural

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[1] This approach characterized the work of Ruth Benedict and Edward Sapir in the 1930s and was theorized in depth by David Schneider and Clifford Geertz in the 1960s and 1970s.

[2] So much has been published on this that I will not attempt to list sources here. Interested readers should consult e.g. bibliographic essays published in *Annual Review of Anthropology*.

meanings crystallize. Cultural processes are inherently indexical, always grounded in temporal, spatial and social specifics. Time and space are experienced by specific speakers or, for our purposes here, actors who always exist in a network of social relations. Discourse processes routinely instantiate socially relevant and culturally meaningful points of time, space and interactive relations. As Lo notes at the outset of her essay, Benveniste (1971 [1956], 1971 [1958]) laid out the construction of subjectivity as one of the fundamental functions of language. Subjectivity is encoded in pronoun systems, in time and space deictics (*here*, *there*, *then*, *now*, and so on) and in performativity (the difference between "I promise" whereby the speaker performs a social action, and "she promises" whereby the speaker describes someone else performing a social action). Pronominal systems are necessarily structured oppositionally: *I* intersubjectively related to *you*; the intersubjective axis of *I* (or *we*) and *you* in opposition to *he*, *she*, *it*, *they* as objects of reference outside the axis of discourse. And since *I* is the speaker at the moment of speaking, each change of speaker instantiates a new pronominal net. Similarly, the deictic oppositions of *here/there*, *this/that*, *then/now* radiate out from *I*. Cultural processes can be imagined as the intersection of subjectivities, of people bound to each other in complex social roles, each acting as *I*, sharing some, often much but probably never total understanding of what the elements of their shared world mean, each taking a stance and often contesting the stance of others, each tracing a social path through pronominal and deictic patterns that wink in and out of existence, each moment of understanding subject to revision in the next moment.

Existing within this complex, ever-shifting frame is the system of meanings instantiated through discursive functions. Jakobson (1960) argued that meaning in discourse emerges in a complex of functions, each of which is related to an element of the speech situation: Expressive function, characterized by an interpretive orientation toward the speaker; directive function by orientation toward the addressee; referential function by orientation toward the content or object of the message; poetic function by orientation toward the form of the message; phatic function by orientation toward the channel; and metalinguistic function by orientation toward the code. (Interestingly, the expressive, directive and referential functions also line up with pronoun orientation: *I/we*; *you*; *he/she/it/they*). Jakobson further stressed that discourse is routinely multifunctional, with one function dominating and organizing others. Silverstein (1976) refined this by distinguishing function$_1$ (the conventionally categorized function, often stated as simple intention) from function$_2$ (the actual outcome). Thus, an utterance or piece of writing conventionally classified as simply a piece of information (referential function$_1$) can also have a directive outcome (function$_2$, convincing cultural actors that such-and-such is indeed reality) - depending on the nature of the relation among those involved. The very constituents of meaning (and thus of 'culture') are relational. In these ways, indexicality - the anchoring of meaning in the contingent - runs throughout all the discursive processes through which culture is made manifest. Haugen (1972) proposed imagining linguistic (i.e. discursive) processes as an ecology, a most useful trope here. Just as living species are dynamic elements of ecological systems and so never static, "culture" and "language" exist within (indeed are elements of) historically grounded social systems. What any one of us perceives as "a culture" or "a language" is a temporary, partial and contingent manifestation of ongoing processes. The three essays reviewed here make that clear in their close examination of micro-level elements of those processes.

2. Roles

Each paper examines the emergence of specifically sited modes of cultural identification; each investigates that emergence via the role-relations of the participants; each locates role-relations within a specific institution existing in a specific place and time.   In her examination of the teacher-student relation in two Chinese heritage language schools, He asks whence the source of the teacher's authority. By not taking expert-novice role relations as universally given, He shows how students can look beyond the teacher for expert information, thus reconstituting certain key elements of those roles.   Kang's examination of the ideology underlying role-enactment among Korean camp counselors illustrates how that role might be differently enacted (or at least conceptualized): As cultural mediator and transmission agent, or as personal exemplar and mentor.   Lo examines the contrastive stances taken by a teacher in a Korean heritage school toward good versus bad students; in doing so, the teacher models ideal teacher-student role relations.   Of particular interest in He's and Lo's studies are the ways in which the teachers' roles are contested: Both use conversational repairs as devices to nudge students into responding in ways more unmarkedly appropriate to the student role (unmarked from the teachers' perspective).   In neither case does it quite work. Role-imagining cannot be insulated from the rest of the cultural ecology, as is also shown in Kang's analysis of the re-imagining of the camp counselor role.

3. Subjective alignments and oppositions

Each essay pays attention to pronoun usage and *I/we* alignments. Taking a Barthian perspective, Kang shows how the use of *I/we* versus *they* among some camp counselors aligns with mutually exclusive categorizations of *Korean* and *Korean-American*. Kang also shows how self-categorization sets up what amounts to a metacommunicative frame, i.e. a frame of reference within which one accounts for one's views, motives and actions. This is not just "I am X, you are Y" but "My being X is why I act/believe as I do."   Thus, ethnic labels become part of a commentary on how one makes sense of one's life. He's Chinese heritage language teacher deploys *we* versus *they* to guide understandings of what it means to participate in a classroom; the teacher engages in a tug-of-war with students for whom *we* includes their own participation in their daily school, which the teacher tries to recast as *they*. Unlike Kang's counselors, whose concern is with contrasting meanings of *Korean/Korean-American*, He's teachers are concerned with being versus not being properly Chinese. Similarly, Lo's Korean teacher deploys epistemic stances that locate students as properly Korean by setting them up as morally responsible, distinct individuals, as opposed to "some students" whose subjectivity the teacher in effect colonizes by way of demonstrating how they are not paragons of good Korean behavior.

4. Function

Each of these papers illustrates key speech acts and functions in the constitution of identity. In each case, the interplay of reference with expressive and directive functions is particularly interesting: Reference, since it focuses on information, is generally identified with cultural content, but what is equally interesting are expressions of authority or belief or other stances, and attempts to persuade or otherwise direct one's interlocutor into agreement or compliance. Such deployments can be critical in role-enactment, as we see in He 4.1, "choice of script," where the Chinese language teacher finds herself in a functional tug-of-war with a student over what constitutes correct information. The teacher deploys several not very successful repairs to reinforce her expression of authority and her directives to the student, whose non-compliance does affect what counts as acceptable information. In Lo's paper, the contrastive encoding of deductions and suppositions (about the actions of the good Korean students) versus straight fact (about the actions of "some friends") illustrates the deployment of referential functions in support of the teacher's expression of moral stance and (implicit) directives (on how to behave) to the rest of the class. One might also say that He's and Lo's data illustrate the cumulative function$_2$ effect of the U.S. linguistic/cultural ecology on what it means to be a teacher. Kang's study differs in that 'camp counselor' is not a traditional ethnic role as 'teacher' is; here the question is how to define 'counselor' vis-a-vis the functions involved. For those identifying as Korean-American, Korean and Korean-American are distinguished as modes of information (cultural information versus personal being) and ways of passing that information on (instruction versus enactment): Heritage is learned, mentorship is experienced. In each essay, the specific 'contents' of ethnic identity are not simply there, but woven into a multifunctional array of speech acts and linked to institutions, roles, and local social history.

5. Conclusion: The fluidity of identity

Each of these studies makes it clear that no static meaning can be assigned to Korean or Chinese. Comparable questions emerge in each study: Who categorizes whom as properly ethnic? To what extent can one define oneself, and in the face of what oppositional enactments of identity? How does ethnic authority contrast in different institutions? How is ethnic authority paired with moral authority? With institutional control? What is the local place of that institution? What constitutes ethnic information? In what ways are classification systems mapped onto a range of possibilities, turning what might be amorphous or ambiguous content into a distinct cultural model? Each study demonstrates the significance of moral stance in cultural definition, and each shows the discursive devices through which people enact their roles to clarify that moral stance. It is a bit ironic. In the U.S. at least– and each of these studies was done in the U.S. - the folk-model of ethnicity and culture overwhelmingly privileges the idea of content: Culture as a set of traits, beliefs, customs, values. At the same time, people experience ethnic identity as a way to be, as something inherent, something felt, and this is very often (I hesitate to say always) associated with a moral compass. Given that fact, and given that ethnic distinctions seem fundamentally deictic (*us* or *them,* i.e. *not-us*) it seems reasonable to surmise that the oppositional devices which discursively reconstitute cultural identity in new locales are more fundamentally

about constituting a moral stance, and in that way are far more durable than ethnic/cultural identities themselves.

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