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Voice

The concept of voice, meaning the linguistic construction of social personae, addresses the question "Who is speaking?" in any stretch of discourse. Linguistic anthropologists studying the complex and fluctuating relations among people, their ways of using language, and projected selves take as fundamental several observations. One is the ubiquity of stylistic variation in the speech habits of both communities and individuals. Another is the existence in communities of linguistic ideologies that link stylistic variations to differences in social identities, statuses, value systems, and so forth. A third is the complexity and manipulability of participation roles, by which persons can take on a wide range of possible alignments toward the words being used in any given context, e.g., claiming authorship versus merely reporting another's words.

Research on voice directs attention to the diverse processes though which social identities are represented, performed, transformed, evaluated, and contested. This has bearing on two common ways in which "voice" is invoked by other disciplines. One centers on political representation and authority, that is, "having a voice." The second raises epistemological questions about relations among identity, experience, and point of view, as in "claiming one's own voice." Politics and epistemology often converge, in asking, for example, "Can the subaltern speak?" Faced with such questions, linguistic anthropology takes the details of linguistic form to be crucial for any effort to trace how speakers shift among positions, identities, and alignments towards the words they speak. Political roles, for instance, may demand particular linguistic features, as when the apparently timeless or disinterested voice of preacher or pedagogue facilitates a legitimate capacity to take the floor, speak on behalf of larger groups, or talk about others. But research also demonstrates the artfulness and subtlety at work not just in highly self-conscious forms of expression, such as literary or oratorical texts, but in everyday uses of language. It gives empirical substantiation to the theoretical proposition that speakers are not unified entities, and their words are not transparent expressions of subjective experience.

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Voices not only construct identities but also play them off against one another. The influence of Mikhail Bakhtin and V. N. Voloshinov has heightened analytic attention to the agonistic and fluid character of the correlations between linguistic and sociological variables. Bakhtin's notion of heteroglossia entails a world of stylistic and social differences in which voices play against one another or jostle for dominance even within the discourse of a single speaker. Every speaker has available numerous ways of speaking that are associated by virtue of linguistic ideologies with different character types, professions, genders, social statuses, kinship roles, moral stances, ideological systems, age groups, ethnicities, and so forth. In a given stretch of discourse these may be expressed by virtually any linguistic contrast, including lexical or language choice, intonation and (physical) voice quality, variations in fluency, phonology, or syntax, shifts in pronouns, deictics, or evidentials. These permit speakers to claim, comment on, or disavow different identities and evaluative stances at different moments. A commonplace example of evaluation is parody, in which a speaker pits one voice, the parodist, against another, the kind of person characterized by the words being parodied; other noticeable examples are cliches, irony, mock accents, allusions, and proverbs. Relations among voices are also worked out at the level of interaction, especially in the ways in which responsibility for words is distributed among participants in a speech event or text. Participation roles are the parts one may play in what Goffman called the "production format." Different roles can be overtly expressed even within a single turn of talk, as in the embedding of one person's words (the author) in the discourse of another (the animator) by means of reported speech; the imputed author, of course, may be a construction of the animator. Further distinctions are common: a press secretary may animate words whose author is a speech writer but whose principal, the person responsible for the message, is the President (who may, in turn, be claiming to speak in the name of the nation). Roles may leak, as when the animator's emotions affect reported speech, potentially shifting the attribution of voices: the press secretary may be fired. By attending to the production format as a whole, we can observe the construction not only of speakers' identities, but also the social positioning of interlocutors as particular kinds of addressees, overhearers, and "targets" (the President, for instance, addressing one as citizen, not spouse). Notice that whereas heteroglossia refers to multiple voices within a single speaker, participation roles entail aspects of a single voice distributed across several speakers. In either case, voice is not a personal attribute, but involves shared assumptions about recognizable types of character and their attributes.

Much of the current interest in voices concerns questions of identity and agency. By tracking different voices in ordinary conversations we can show the articulation of macro and micro scales of power. The play of voices depends on listeners' capacity to distinguish between a voice and its animator, but the exact identity of a given voice may be contested, ambiguous, or rendered purposely indeterminate, with important social consequences such as the occlusion or diffusion of responsibility. To speak in a singular or monologic voice appears to be the highly marked outcome of political effort rather than a natural or neutral condition. Genres of religious speech

such as glossolalia, shamanistic performance, divination, scriptural quotation, preaching, mantras, or prayer, commonly stage or index voices of otherworldly, dead, invisible, or otherwise absent participants in a wide variety of ways. Individuals do not always control the attribution of the voices they animate: in possession, for example, it may be up to the audience to determine if a spirit speaks. Nor do individual speakers necessarily seek to claim for themselves a voice that seems authentically their own, but rather may disavow responsibility for their words in favor of more authoritative, divine, or collective agents. Research on voice reveals how the internal complexity of the language-using subject is inseparable from its articulation with a social world of other subjects, both present and absent in any given context.

(See also *agency, healing, heteroglossia, identity, indexicality, participation, plagiarism, prayer, prophecy, register, style*)

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