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**'Agents' or 'participation'?: Sociolinguistic
frameworks for the study of
media engagement**

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‘Agents’ or ‘participation’: Sociolinguistic frameworks for the study of media engagement

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New media are increasingly influential in schools, and this is often unconnected to the curriculum.¹ But how does this actually affect the texture of everyday life? This is a question addressed by the two chapters in this section, by Vally Lytra and Alexandra Georgakopoulou.

Their answers are partly shaped by differences in focus and scope. Lytra builds a macro-sociolinguistic sketch of complementary schools and Turkish speakers in the UK, and shows popular cultural media engagement (PCME) impacting on the reproduction of traditional ethnic culture, an issue that Georgakopoulou only mentions in passing. Georgakopoulou, on the other hand, draws on fieldwork that involved 100 field-site visits over two years (rather than 10 visits over 3 months),² studies two students with very different peer profiles (rather than one), and provides a detailed account of the links between PCME and positioning within peer-group hierarchies. But their accounts also incline towards two rather different perspectives on everyday communication, each with a substantial pedigree. In what follows, I shall try to bring out this difference, simplifying but hopefully not wholly misrepresenting the approach in each chapter in the interests of a wider argument. After that, I will offer an assessment of the implications for our understanding of PCME.

The first perspective emphasises the agency of speakers. It emerged in sociolinguistics as a reaction to structuralism, which, according to Giles & Smith 1979, “cast the role of the normal speakers as a kind of ‘sociolinguistic automaton’”, treating “speech behaviour as ... a blob of clay moulded by situational constraints” (pp.46,64). In contrast, speaker-focused sociolinguistics offers an

“understanding of language... which... is rather different from the established theories of structuralism, and could be characterised as flexible and fragmentary.... [S]peakers... use their speech in a remarkably sensitive way to locate themselves and the situation of speaking in a multi-dimensional space, whilst at the same time conveying the message contained in the ‘meaning’ of their sentences... In other words, every utterance may be seen as an act of identity by its speaker” (Hudson 1980:231,233)

The second perspective acknowledges agency, but the capacity to control and influence what happens is no longer centred in the speaker. Instead, it is dispersed among the participants, artefacts, circumstances and histories that make up the communicative situation. This view often draws on ethnomethodology and conversation analysis, and it is a way of seeing that analysts often develop and practise in micro-analytic data sessions. McDermott characterises it as a “move away from a linguistics of speakers towards a linguistics of participation” (1988:61), and within this frame,

“[a]rticulateness and inarticulateness are not the properties of persons or their utterances; they are the properties of situations that arrange for the differential availability of words and ways of appreciating words across persons in a community” (1988:61)

Moerman (1988) plays up the difference. He recognises that social scientists no longer see actors as ‘social dopes’ (or sociolinguistic automata) – they “honor social actors as intelligent beings”:

“But the actors they construct are... omnipotent creatures with ravenous appetites. A constant calculator..., this imagined actor chooses among preformed alternatives in a stripped down

¹ See Rampton et al 2008, and Harris & Rampton 2010:256-7.

² See Rampton et al 2008:6

world... The social dope... has been replaced by a cardsharp, by a free-wheeling cultural entrepreneur.” (1988:56)

Instead, he invokes conversation analysis, also citing Bourdieu:

“Conversation analysis constructs a different actor: a ‘virtuoso’ (Bourdieu 1977:79) for whom ‘[t]he schemes of thought and expression he has acquired are the basis for the intentionless invention of regulated improvisation’; an actor who thinks, if that is the word for it, on his feet. Those feet, in turn, are planted on some craft in a wind-buffed sea... If social analysis must construct a person, it is more apt to imagine him as a surfer whose practiced body moves unthinkingly with wave, wind, and board... Such an actor, with ‘No thinker behind the thoughts; no doer behind the deeds’, better captures the agent of actual interactive events.” 67

Although the alignment certainly isn’t absolute, Lytra’s paper often leans towards the ‘linguistics of speakers’. It thematises Baran as someone who agentively “draws on, combines and transforms different sets of linguistic and other semiotic resources” (p.3), focuses on his “situated, intentional and participant-oriented deployment of... resources”, and sees the mobile phone “as a tool for self-expression” (p.30). In line with this, the classifications in Lytra’s interactional data description involve illocutionary speech acts, an approach to analysis that is frequently characterised as speaker-centred (e.g. ‘warn’, ‘evaluate’, ‘summarise’, ‘explains’, ‘ridicule’).

Georgakopoulou leans more to ‘the linguistics of participation’. In this account, identities emerge interactively, and the analysis integrates what individuals say and do with how their actions and utterances are treated by recipients. So Nadia, for example, is characterised as an “an initiator, an assessor and a recipient of positive assessments” (p.18), as someone who ‘assumes and is ascribed... positive online roles’ (p. 22). In a similar vein, the quantitative comparison of Nadia and Habiba in Table 2 focuses on relational practices, which are necessarily based on the analysis of sequences of turns (“initiated by informant” [an analytic assessment that entails scrutiny of the preceding talk]; “taken up by other participants”; “topically linked”; “involved in positive assessment sequence”). And instead of simply being the embodied individuals who can each be heard producing different turns in the field recordings, selves are ‘discursive constructions’ (p.2), with the ‘self-projects’ that participants engage in being “engendered, necessitated or constrained” interactively.

So there are discernible differences in how these two papers approach interaction. The first dwells on the named and embodied individual, who is seen as skilfully mobilising resources in accordance with the needs and options s/he perceives in the situation. The second prioritises interactional activity itself, which it treats as a dialectic of moves in which embodied persons position and get positioned by one another, to the extent that it becomes hard to “know the dancer from the dance” (McDermott 1977:44, following Yeats 1928). Although I certainly don’t manage it in all of my own work, I think there are at least three reasons why the second approach produces a fuller picture of popular cultural media engagement.

First, as conversation analysts have amply demonstrated in their attention to sequences of turns rather than to single utterances, researchers can often get a better understanding of the interactional significance of any given act if they also consider the response that it elicits. So, for example, Lytra sees Baran’s fusion of different musical and dance genres as ‘creative’, but it is easy for an action’s novelty to the outside analyst to mislead him/her into thinking that it is an innovation for the local participants as well (Sapir 1949:504; Becker 1995:229; Rampton 2010). This mixing of genres is in fact treated as a negative disruption in the teacher’s (eventual) response, so Lytra’s positive characterisation looks somewhat controversial and calls for a clearer warrant in the reaction of the other local interactants.

Second, both projects are operating in sites where the boundary between research and practical intervention is often very permeable (schools), and they offer different perspectives on the responsibility for what transpires in the environments they study. With its emphasis on agency and its traceable links to “a psychology of intelligence and skills” (McDermott 1988:61), speaker-centred analysis loads a lot of responsibility for what happens onto the individual, and there is a risk that in the educational uptake of research, findings are used to blame individuals for the weak positions where they find themselves. In contrast, the linguistics of participation connects with “a psychology

of concerted arrangements for information dispersal” (distributed cognition), and activity-centred analysis sees states and actions as being jointly produced by the participants and the situations in which they come together. This leads to findings that are harder to assimilate within the individualising ideologies that dominate education, and indeed Varenne & McDermott argue that “to respect the individual, politically and morally, one must analytically cast one’s eyes away” (1998:155), turning instead to the task of “document[ing] carefully the social conditions in which [individuals] must always express themselves” (1998:145). There are no issues of victim-blaming in Lytra’s paper because it centres on a person who is generally well-rated in the environment she studies, but it is worth asking how an agent-centred linguistics would handle the comparison of high and low performing students that Georgakopoulou engages in, and what its portrait of an informant like Habibah would look like. If speaker-centred analysis is driven by emancipatory political principles, there is pressure to produce character portraits that are positive, even heroic, and cases like Habibah’s present a challenge.

Third, analysis centred on interaction is better at bringing out the ordinariness of the practices in focus. Lytra closes her paper with a quotation from Pennycook:

“difference and diversity, multilingualism and hybridity are not rare and exotic conditions to be sought out and celebrated but the quotidian ordinariness of everyday life” (2007:95).

This points to a tension that is central to ethnography and consists of a dialectic between the theories, debates, issues and formulations that engage researchers on their home turf in the academy on the one hand – for example, “difference and diversity, multilingualism and hybridity” – and on the other, the perspectives and priorities of the people in ordinary life whom they study. It is very difficult to balance these two sets of concerns, but there is a vital buffer to analytic invasion of the ordinary in the attention that activity-centred analysis gives to sequences and the way that acts are received in endless cycles of act and response/act and response (adjacency). This is made very clear in the Goodwin paper cited by Lytra:³

“the analyst cannot simply take an inventory of all semiotic resources in a setting that could potentially be brought into play, and use this inventory as a frame to describe a relevant context... [N]ot all possible and relevant resources are in play at any particular moment... To describe the context we have to track in detail the temporal unfolding of the interaction, while attending to what the participants themselves are constituting for each other as the phenomena to be taken into account for the organization of the action of the moment” (2000:1504).

Tuning to the perspectives operating in the practices being studied is widely recognised as a way of making space for the mundane, and we have already referred to it. But once this commitment and approach are in place, it is not at all straightforward mobilising the apparatus of scholarship so that its relationship with the ordinary becomes really productive. At this point of our discussion, it is worth looking more closely at the crafting in Georgakopoulou’s chapter, which mainly engages with two literatures – linguistics/discourse analysis and feminist cultural studies. It is worth taking each in turn.

Early on, Georgakopoulou draws a distinction between ‘ways of telling’, ‘sites’ and ‘tellers’, and behind this lies a massive apparatus of scholarship in linguistics, narrative, conversation and discourse analysis, much of it focused on structures and systems. But the chapter’s overall interest is in meaning-making and communicative action, and the underlying assumption is that these emerge in a complex and contingent interplay between participant understanding and a potentially huge range of semiotic systems, covering phonetics, grammar, turn-taking, narrative structure and much more. Knowing exactly what the options and conventions within a given system are at any one moment is vital, but it is impossible to take a particular atomistic, sub-systemic selection and extrapolate directly to its communicative significance – this can only be done in relation to the larger semiotic ensemble

³ Goodwin’s approach is very much activity- rather than speaker-centred: “any participation framework is an ongoing contingent accomplishment, something not under the control of a single party (who can at best make proposals about the structure of participation that should be operative at any moment), but rather something that has to be continuously achieved through public displays of orientation within ongoing processes of interaction” (2000:1500)

(including of course the dynamics of adjacency). In this context, Georgakopoulou's 'ways of telling', 'sites' and 'tellers' can be seen as 'mid-level' integrative concepts that bring together a lot of the same semiotic systems but focus our analytic gaze on broadly distinguishable aspects of the communicative process. The hope is that these broader, more encompassing/multi-semiotic foci will facilitate the production of analytic claims that can actually illuminate participants' lived experience and connect with their own accounts of it. And yes, as the analysis proceeds, Georgakopoulou shows that indeed they do help us to see different patterns in how her informants' engage with popular cultural media. Throughout the chapter, Georgakopoulou uses the term 'heuristic', positioning the scholarly literature as a source of 'sensitising' concepts "suggest[ing] directions along which to look" rather than 'definitive' constructs "provid[ing] prescriptions of what to see" (Blumer 1969:148). Handled deftly like this, the linguistics literature becomes a valuable resource for ethnography, offering a rich and empirically robust collection of frameworks and procedures for exploring the details of social life, extending ethnography into intricate zones of culture and society that might otherwise be missed.

The literature in feminist cultural studies operates differently, and rather than functioning at the chapter's analytic core, it provides an answer to the ever-pressing 'so what?' question. Georgakopoulou makes it clear that this literature wasn't her starting baseline when she says that linguistic ethnography allows her to enquire "if and how local interactions resonate with widely circulating discourses" (p.4; emphases added). And in terms of the actual history of the analysis itself, it sounds as though the contradictory discourses about 'girl power' and 'girls at risk' moved into focus when, as often happens in ethnography, the analyst asked herself: 'what are the questions to which these data provide some answers?' (reversing the orthodox sequence of enquiry). But once the connection is made, the analysis offers a powerful but nuanced description of how deeply these big themes permeate the girls' PCMEs. In a process of re-perspectivisation, the two discourses and the tensions between them are brought 'down to earth', so we can see how they are routinely handled by people they refer to and affect. Here we can see that they're inescapable but also ordinary and mostly liveable, and if we follow these girls through the scenes in which these discourses becomes salient, we can start to document a plurality of tactics and stances it would be hard to predict from afar. So, for example, in addition to being weakened by discourses of risk in the ways that Georgakopoulou discusses, Habibah also participated in interactions where heterosexual risk was associated with intense sociability and excitement (Harris & Rampton 2010).

So there are two scholarly literatures that are vital to Georgakopoulou's chapter, but neither is allowed to dominate. Linguistics may be pervasive, but rather than prescribing what must be looked at when, where, and how, it is treated as a sensitising heuristic, while cultural studies only enters as an interlocutor in the later stages of the analytic process. This leaves space for the discovery and description of patterns in local practice, and although she dwells more on some than others, Georgakopoulou gradually builds up a cumulative picture of the part that PCME plays in processes and systems of different duration, scope and social reach – moment-to-moment interaction, reiterated ways of telling, reflective narratives, cross-situational self-projects, peer-group roles, school achievement, pupil-teacher and parent-child relations. Different aspects of PCME play a part in processes at many levels of cultural organisation, and these layers often interact in contingent ways that have to be investigated empirically (see Rampton 2006:Ch. 3.8 on multileveled analysis of PCME and Blommaert 2013:Ch1 on sociolinguistic complexity).

This makes it impossible to predict whether and how processes and phenomena identified outside the field, in the academy or in public discourse, actually link with the ways that people interact together in particular activities in particular settings (i.e. whether and how notions like hybridity are or aren't part of the "quotidian ordinariness of everyday life"). It also presents a major challenge for projects committed to the empirical analysis of 'intersectionality', which start with the analytic/academic identification of multiplicity in X or Y – multiple identities, multilingualism, multi-media and/or multi-modality – and then look for the ways in which these interact together in everyday settings. The risk for intersectional analysis is that the conceptual entities identified at the start will mutate or disappear as one's analytic gaze moves through the multi-layered processes coming together in any social field, and it may well turn out that one can only hold onto the initial terms if one's willing to disregard the ecologies in which signs, categories and actions gain meaning. Yes, it is vital to link the great debates to detailed analyses of the everyday, but Georgakopoulou's chapter shows us how to do this. Know the literatures and let them suggest directions, but don't revere them,

and when it comes to analysis, keep them mostly backstage (sorting the props, walk-on parts etc). Work inductively with the complex moving ensembles of practice, moving backwards and forwards between the layered processes operating in the social field you're looking at. And only then turn to see whether, how and how far it's possible to translate the emerging portrait of cultural organisation into terms that engage with the wider debates.

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