

COMMUNICATIVE ACTION AND THE STANDARDIZATION
OF CREOLE LANGUAGES

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Let me begin with the premise that human communication is before all else a kind of action. Specifically, it is an action in which persons simultaneously attend to one another and to the world. Like any other action, communication is purposive, that is, intentional. But that intentionality need not imply conceptualization. Neither the motor spark of the action, nor the goal toward which it moves need be conceptualized or represented in the mind as a mental category. Intentionality most often is non-conceptual, as for example, when a basketball player shoots a jump shot.

Communication begins as other actions begin, i.e., as non-conceptually intended action. To say that communication is non-conceptual action is to say that it need not involve meanings nor messages of any sort. Consider for example a pointed finger. Pointed fingers do not "mean" anything. They reveal no hidden messages; strictly speaking, they are not interpretable. Pointed fingers simply turn another person's attention to a matter of experience. Such pointings are communicative for they are connective. They serve to connect another's eyes to some external reality. But while they are connective and communicative, they are not, strictly speaking, meaningful or interpretable. They are simply directive and perceptible.

Now it is my contention that all human communication begins as connective communicative action, like pointed fingers. Only later, in the act of communication, are such actions sometimes clothed with meaning. Only after the communicative act do communications take on meaning. David McNeill says, "The speaker does not map symbols onto meanings (regarded as something not in the language action from the start) but exhibits the meaning with the language action itself. Thus we have a simple situation in which speech needs nothing else (neither "ideas" no "representations") to mean what it means. A speaker does not think of an idea and then find a sentence which expresses it. He acts in a way that is appropriate to the situation, and all of the meaning is already in this act." (McNeill, forthcoming).

It undoubtedly chafes to talk of meaningless communicative action and to entertain the notion that such meaningless actions are fundamental communicative acts which might subsequently be clothed in meaning but which are never supplanted by meanings.

But such a characterization of communication is, I think, necessary in order to account for the emergence of community.

Community is the locus of and the prerequisite for meaningful activity. Community is "something which grounds speech as meaningful communication" (D. Chaney 1982). But in the same voice we must recognize that "community is simultaneously produced by speech." Again community makes meaningful speech possible, yet it emerges out of communicative activity. Specifically, the speech out of which community arises must be a meaningless communication, else we would be grounding meaning in meaning. My own proposal is that meaning always arises out of action, or in more elaborate words, meaning is grounded in community and community arises out of communicative action.

Communicative action can be approached from different angles, each of which gives us a special insight into community. One might describe the organization of face-to-face interaction including the manner in which the gaze, facial expression, and body position of interactants are articulated. One might describe the timing and rhythm of communicative movements. Or one might, as I intend to do here, consider the manner in which the communicative channels are integrated differently for use in communicative action at greater or lesser distances.

Let me explain this last approach in greater detail. The communicative channels, that is, the eyes, the face, the hands, the body, and the voice, each make distinctive contributions to communicative actions which are undertaken at different ranges. Face to face communication involves one sort of integration of channels, while communication at a distance usually requires the extended utilization of one channel over another. Communication across space is accomplished with megaphones, semaphore flags, drums, whistles, writing, radio, etc. And communication across time is accomplished by writing, audio recording, video recording, etc.

Communities could move freely back and forth from one sort of integration of channels to another as need requires and a communicative distance increases and decreases, but more regularly one sort of channel is selected to prevail over others and is used for all communicative distances. Briefly, that sort of channel integration which is employed in the cultural performances of a people tends to be ordained, sanctified and set above all others as a prototype to be emulated. So ordained, that specific sort of channel integration becomes a typical communicative action for a people, and as a typical communicative action it generates a type of community, one endowed with specific sorts of social relations and generative of specific sorts of meanings. (For a more elaborate discussion of communication and performance, see Washabaugh (forthcoming)).

Let me briefly summarize the foregoing discussion. Community, the ground of meaningful speech, is itself generated by communicative action. And the salient characteristic of this action is that it pulls people together in a particular way, laying, as it moves, the ground for meaningful communication. The actions of communication can be described from different angles, one such angle being the typical and prevailing mode of integration of the communicative channels in which are employed in a community's interactions.

Creole Societies

Creole language communities, like all other language communities, arise out of communicative actions of a particular sort. And, peculiar though the situation be, they arise in symbiotic association with metropolitan language communities. Mintz and Price (1976) have described this peculiar symbiotic relationship with their concentric model of the organization of plantation societies: "The so-called 'Creole' cultures of plantation colonies began to be forged during the earliest interactions of Europeans and Africans of different origin with each other... The free and slave sectors (were) deeply divided from each other yet profoundly interdependent... The institutions, created by the slaves to deal with what are at once the most ordinary and the most important aspects of life, took on their characteristic shape within the parameters of the master's monopoly of power, but separate from the master's institutions." (Ibid, pp. 18, 20, 43).

The Creole language is one of those institutions which arose within but separate from the master's institutions, and like all other systems for meaningful communication, it must have arisen from communicative action which itself arose within but separate from the master's communicative action. Let me propose even more strongly that Creole communicative action arose within, separate from, and in contradistinction to the master's communicative behavior. Peoples who are steamrolled by a more powerful social system generate antistructural actions (Turner 1969) and anti-languages (Halliday 1976). So too the communicative actions of Creole peoples were predictably both separate from and opposed to the communicative actions of their metropolitan masters.

It is not possible to reconstruct many of the aspects of the communicative practice of metropolitan people during the period of European expansion, but certainly one generality can be proposed with some certainty. The metropolitan people in Europe at the time were "writerly" people. By "writerly" I mean that writing was their performed mode of communication; and, as well, it was the recently devised tool of national unification

(Fishman 1972) that made the very expansion of Europe possible. The recently popular written European vernaculars laid the footings for national unification and national unification was the sine qua non for expansion, colonization, and plantation development. In short, the metropolitan peoples were able to become metropolitan because they were "writerly." Their communicative actions were "writerly" and their community was correspondingly "writerly" in character.

Creole communicative action is, like metropolitan communicative action, difficult to reconstruct in any detail. But as surely as the metropolitan masters were "writerly" in their communicative action, the slaves were "anti-writerly." Not only were their communicative actions not infused with the spirit and style of written vernaculars, they were constructed so as to thwart that spirit and style. It is not enough to say that Creole communicative was unwritten, face to face communication. It was, more importantly, fashioned so as to confound the action of writing. And hence the sort of communities which emerged within Creole societies were "anti-writerly."

Let me provide at least one illustration of what I mean by "writerly" and "anti-writerly" communities. The actions of writing sets the writer apart from the reader. Reader is not even present at the act of writing, and the writer often times must construct the reader in imagination (Ong 1977). The writer is active and the giver of information; the reader is passive and only receives. It is predictable that writing grounds social relations which are marked by rigid stratification and hierarchical arrangement. Communication that is "anti-writerly" avoids such sender-receiver alienations, and is predictably associated with an absence of conventional social separations and hierarchical arrangements. Applying this aspect of "writerly" communication to metropolitan and Creole societies, we can see, as our hypothesis predicts, that the metropolitan society of the masters is just the sort of hierarchically arranged society which we have called "writerly." Status was conventionally determined by such criteria as wealth, education, color, history, etc. But Creole societies reject such conventional criteria for ranking. They tend to be egalitarian in spirit (P. Wilson 1974), and where ranking does occur it tends to be founded on criteria which are in all ways opposed to those of the European masters, e.g., reputation is established by rhetorical virtuosity, drinking and fighting prowess, etc. In summary, writerly communicative action is associated with writerly social relations in metropolitan masters, and anti-writerly communicative action is associated with anti-writerly social relations which, among Creole people, arose during plantation periods and extend down even to the present as the dominant style of relationship in contemporary societies.

Standardization

Let us now consider the issue of the standardization of language. Standardization is the establishment of linguistic uniformity which everyone agrees is a matter which is highly charged with political significance. But the establishment of that uniformity, whether by fiat or by voluntary practice, requires a codification of grammar and lexical form and a conventionalization of orthography. These maneuvers are necessary preliminaries to standardization; and we usually consider them to be politically neutral sorts of procedures. Grammatical codification and orthographic conventionalization are mere technicalities without which the real task of standardization, which is the creation of uniformity, cannot begin.

But I contend that grammatical codification and orthographic conventionalization are not benign technicalities. Rather they are interventionary tactics which render language varieties uniform by transmogrifying the communicative actions, and hence the community, which grounds language. They create uniformity, by first creating "writerliness." As Wurm (1977: 349) points out, standardization programs cannot realistically expect to directly alter the patterns of everyday speaking. Their first objective is instead to establish literacy and that literacy once it has taken hold, will work its own changes on the speech of the community.

It is implied in Wurm's comments issues that the Creole complexities of variation and fuzzy language boundaries on the one hand, and the oral art and rhetorical virtuosity so dear to Creole peoples on the other, are neither of them serious obstacles or special predispositions for standardization. For the goals of standardization, being the establishment of a uniform "writerly" community, will be accomplished by supplanting both that variability and that oral art by "writerly" homogeneity and "writerly" art. Variability and oral art are not impediments or predispositions, for they are appurtenances of a completely different social order which will all be swept away with the inauguration of a "writerly" community.

Codification of a grammar and conventionalization of orthography seem benign and non-interventionary technicalities to us because we, in our own "writerliness," take "writerly" communication to be the way of all humankind. But a more objective picture should make it clear that the spread of these conventions does nothing less than pave the way for a transformation of communicative action in the Creole society. And such a transformation of action is the first step toward the transformation of the Creole society itself.

I am in no position to judge whether such a transformation

is good or bad. That is a matter that only Creole people themselves can decide. But one thing is clear. While such standardization conventions as grammatical codification and orthographic conventionalization may save Creole and Pidgin languages, which is what Wurm suggests that should aim to do, they will drastically alter Creole people. To my way of thinking the maintenance or loss of a people--people being defined by distinctive communicative action--is a far weightier matter than the maintenance or loss of a language.

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