

AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC EXAMINATION: OBSCENITY AS A REGISTER WITHIN A WORKPLACE SPEECH COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

By method of autoethnographic examination and Dell Hymes' *Ethnography of Speaking*, this linguistic study focuses on the development of a specific register within a speech community of a seafood-processing establishment. Workers employed a register of obscene language in this setting to create intense and multifaceted relationships, revealing a greater language ideology determined by the establishment's setting. In association with the obscene register and language ideology, specific language tools were exposed by individual employees' salient and personal utilization of them. The author concludes with an analysis of whether this register, language ideology, and instrumentalities, are representative of a greater hidden social consciousness and metaphor.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I would like to acknowledge my utmost respect and admiration for those individuals who make it their life's profession to work in the seafood-processing establishment that is the subject of this paper. It takes great determination, dedication, physical capability, and employee solidarity to perform this type of work. As well, I would like to commend the seafood-processing establishment that is the setting for this paper. As an employer, it

provides its community and workers with many benefits and an excellent support system. Lastly, I would like to thank Professor Chad Uran for the inspiration and encouragement to write this paper. During his time at the University of Victoria, Dr. Uran provided me with innovative, alternative methods of exploring my education in anthropology through a critical lens. His ingenuity, visions, and passion for linguistics and other subjects in anthropology are contagious.

Introduction

Since the age of 15, I have worked in customer service. My everyday attitude was defined by the expectancy to be chipper and polite, all smiles, and no bad days. This behavioural expectancy for the workplace was turned on its head as I transitioned into working at a seafood-processing establishment on a night crew. In this paper I demonstrate that, as a blue-collar employee at a seafood-processing plant, I was part of a speech community and a greater language ideology that utilized a register of obscene speech to produce humour and entertainment, to create strong relationships, and to establish seniority within an otherwise tedious workplace (Uran pers. comm. Sept 13, 21 2011). Language instrumentalities such as code switching, including shocking language and privileged jokes, defined the members of this speech community and produced solidarity while excluding those who did not labour in the same setting, or engage in the same language (Fuller 2005; Khosroshani 1989). Finally, such dialogue illuminated the community's rejection of social norms surrounding prestigious language in the work place setting (Uran pers. comm. Oct 7 2011).

Methodology and Motivation

Autoethnographic research has developed in response to the ultimate goal of analyzing and understanding underlying cultural

systems while still addressing researcher bias and interpretation (Chang 2008). Autoethnography utilizes ethnographic research methods in union with autobiography to study the cultural connections between one's self and others represented in society (Chang 2008). By situating my research within my own experiences as primary data, I hope to present an intimate perspective on this subject while also providing an engaging piece of writing. In this way, the material presented is liberated from what has been traditionally believed to be the easily attained "objective" and impersonal data collection that pervasively seeks to define the "Other" (Chang 2008). Autoethnography helps me, as a researcher, to examine and self-reflect over my own preconceptions. In turn, I hope to share a comprehensible and non-exclusive (as in, easily understood and utilized by those outside of the "ivory-tower" of academia) methodology that others can employ to also increase their self-awareness and cultural consciousness (Chang 2008). It is important to emphasize that all mistakes and assumptions are my own, reflecting only the understandings of one employee from this community who tried their best to conceptualize potential underlying ideologies.

This study was conducted using Dell Hymes' model of *Ethnography of Speaking* (1962). Through Hymes' *Speaking* I will examine evidence of how a particular speech event within a seafood processing workplace demonstrated a greater level of meaning to the everyday relations between employees. This methodology analyses a language interaction through the *setting* (time and place, as well as physical circumstances); the *participants* (speaker and audience); the *ends* (purpose or goals); the *act sequence* (form and order of the event); the *keys* (cues that establish the "tone, manner, or spirit" of the speech act); the *instrumentalities* (forms and styles of speech); the *norms* (social rules governing the event and the participants' actions and reactions); and the *genre* (the kind of speech act of the event; the kind of story) of a situation (Uran pers. comm. Sept 13 2011; Hymes 1962: 55-60). The purpose of this model is to reveal that the language spoken within such a work community is influenced primarily by the mode of work and its environment.

Simultaneously, this language influences the behaviour and actions of its employees by shaping their identities and relationships within the labour context, creating larger underlying ideologies (Hymes 1962; Sapir-Whorf 1956). Throughout this investigation, my argument will be based on the fundamental notion that the seafood-processing employees comprised a self-constructed speech community (Khosroshani 1989). This speech community developed because the employees were separate from the greater population and subsequently created their own dialogue of language to manage their lifestyle, while defending their language and exploiting it only with accepted members of the language community (Khosroshani 1989). By accepting these premises, it is then possible to study how the speech community employed a specific language register, became competent in this register, and developed a unique form of code switching (Fuller 2005; Lybeck 2002; Khosroshani 1989).

Ethnography of Speaking

It takes a certain determined individual to be able to persevere in a dark, wet, and grimy setting inhaling packaging chemicals while being gored by the dying motions of spiky prawns. In this situation, each employee is placed in a position denoting their skills such as transporting prawns into the establishment by hijab, preserving the prawns in a chemical dip, grading the prawns (sorting them by size and weight by means of machine), carrying baskets of prawns to the packagers, packaging and weighing the prawns into sized boxes, organizing the boxes onto racks, and finally freezing and transporting the packaged boxes. Every person is part of a system that works together to produce the end result. The majority of employees perform the duty of packing prawns of specific sizing (e.g., medium, large, extra-large, and jumbo-sized prawns) into boxes. Packaging entails standing in one spot and repeating the same motion constantly for up to 16 hours while striving for placement perfection. Needless to say, this work is monotonous, resulting in the employees' need to create diversions to relieve the tedium of labour. Such entertainment includes creating strong and

intense relationships with coworkers. Most of the time, such social relationships are the only ones to be nurtured over the three-month season due to the nature of the work as night shift employment in a rural environment. I was involved in many experiences relating to the underlying ideologies that I will be explaining shortly. However, my arguments will focus on the characteristics of one particular event to more effectively demonstrate how these principles may manifest.

A specific example of an act sequence is useful in demonstrating the type of language often utilized by people in this type of environment (Hymes 1962). On this particular occasion, my partner had driven me to work and we had stopped on the side of the road. During that time several of my co-workers passed me while they were driving to the plant for that evening's shift. When I arrived to work, on the floor, two of my senior female co-workers made very direct sexual innuendo statements concerning our pause on the road, insinuating that I had performed sexual favours for my partner. I playfully returned this teasing. Our banter continued throughout the shift and was even referred back to on several occasions subsequent to that night in the form of "double voiced" words that I will later discuss (Hill 1982: 729).

Discerning who the participants of the interaction were is important to uncover who would be generally accepted into this specific register. In the prawn processing setting, sex ratio (when I was employed) was equally divided in the workspace, perhaps with a slight inclination towards higher numbers of males over females, with age ranging from 15-70 years old. Most individuals came from a low- to middle-class economic stance. The majority were either post-secondary school students, young individuals working for a living, or long-term employees residing locally. The location of the processing establishment is important because it anticipates the setting and separateness from the general population of the area. The processing plant is located in a wooded area by the ocean, isolated from the community at large. By itself, the establishment has a very industrial-like feel. The local residents of the entire rural

community are tight-knit and often comprise of families that have subsided there for many generations. Although I had met many of my coworkers before this experience, I had never interacted closely with them until working in this setting. In this particular speech event, the participants were two females with high seniority, two friends of the same age as I (who had been employed for the same duration as myself), and of course, myself. Interactions of this nature across sexes would generally only occur between close friends as the company had strict policies concerning sexual harassment.

In this particular engagement, and many others like it, I believe that the end goal of this particular speech event was to determine what my reaction would be to such teasing (Hymes 1962). I was able to receive this mockery without taking offense, and, in turn, reciprocate it jokingly. By doing so I demonstrated my capacity to function and integrate into a setting that was not always supportive (as sometimes cliques would form) or enjoyable. This language was utilized to explore social connections intimately and establish close associations in otherwise uninspiring surroundings. In addition, it was a method employed by women to test and define how individuals fit into the work place system. It was important in such a setting that my co-workers could implicitly perceive that I was a reliable and dedicated worker, who would do my part of the job so that they would not have to pick up any slack after me. In this way, workers support each other through completing their tasks in a timely and efficient manner. Also, by testing me emotionally, my coworkers were able to determine whether I was durable enough to persevere during the hardest, longest shifts. Lastly, it appeared that in some scenarios women did this simply for their own personal enjoyment. In other situations, first-hand accounts told of circumstances where the language use had ventured into the derogatory and offensive, resulting in the emotional upset and alienation of members of the workplace. Not only was this potentially for pure malicious entertainment value, but also for these employees to situate themselves as higher-ranking in seniority.

The keys used in this language register were often objective words implemented to characterize actions and objects; “double voiced” words, in which the dialogue employed could be re-formed and shaped in subsequent interactions; and metaphors in which associations and comparisons expressed vivid imagery and symbolism (Hill 1982). The objective words in this specific interaction were words employed against me to indirectly describe an action that my co-workers imposed on me metaphorically. These words were then applied in later dates as “double voiced” words to recall earlier amusement. Body language as a key was not utilized significantly in this register as employees had to maintain visual and tactile focus on their duties.

In addition, the obscenities and sexual comments aimed towards me during this event and similar interactions were also repeated in later encounters as “double voiced” words; privileged jokes and icebreakers in either situations of conflict or boredom (Hill 1982). These allusions were referred back to in order to evade tension or produce humour. In this way, and as in previously discussed methods of solidarity and seniority production, the separate language register of obscenity was employed as a tool by this speech community to connect individuals within the work space context and provide a unique variety of language instrumentalities (Khosroshani 1989; Hymes 1962). One of these instrumentalities was code switching, in the form of emphasized obscenity. Code switching in the obscene form was utilized as a method for the participants to defy the status quo that the community considered it apart from, create strong relationships, and demark seniority (Fuller 2005).

The true integration into the workspace speech community required a unique form of implicit communitive competence and socio-linguistic competence (Uran pers. comm. Oct 7 2011; Lybeck 2002). Communitive competence is understood to be linguistic knowledge and structure that is not consciously known, but implicitly understood; socio-linguistic competence is the ability to interpret social meaning from linguistic choice, and employing this language within the appropriate social situation (Lybeck 2002; SIL

International 1998; Hymes 1972: 54). Although the obscene register was actively encouraged, it was essential that the participants had a competent awareness of the rules and appropriateness of their language use within specific contexts and what their seniority allowed them to employ. Several inherent competencies were required by the participants of this speech community in order for individuals to be accepted. Firstly, it was understood that to take something “too far” - such as to make physical transgressions against a coworker or to repeat statements that were voiced as inappropriate- was wrong. Secondly, to make direct comments about an individual’s personal life choice - such as sexual orientation or substance abuse - was wrong. Lastly, to use “taboo” words such as racist slurs was also viewed as wrong. If an individual were to transgress such unspoken rules, they could be threatened with the possibility of being reported to higher management, which ultimately jeopardizes an individual’s employment with the company (Lybeck 2002; Uran pers. comm. Oct 7 2011). By understanding and identifying these unspoken rules, the participant could then employ strategic competence - that is verbal and non-verbal techniques to support them in overcoming problems appearing in communication - in order to achieve their linguistic ambitions, gain or improve their relationships with coworkers, and strengthen seniority standing (Lybeck 2002; Uran pers. comm. Oct 7 2011).

In this community, participants rejected the social norms of language use (Hymes 1962). Participants of diverse income backgrounds, long-term employment, or young individuals newly entering the workforce would generally ridicule language of “privilege” and “purity” due to their division from and conceptions of such systems within the work setting. Purism and idealism are not generally compatible in a visually unattractive environment of cold concrete, splattered dead seafood, and noxious chemicals. Linguistic imperialism is therefore discarded and actively rebelled against through the use of obscene language (Uran pers. comm. Sept 30 2011). Cultural rules of language conduct, such as grammar, are viewed as flexible and optional. If an individual were to utilize “proper” or idealized language in a particular conversation or

in everyday vocabulary they would not necessarily be met with cynicism, but might find that their coworkers would engage with them less, resulting in their isolation from the speech community. In the next section I address the hypothetical genre of this interaction and why this register may have evolved.

Discussion and Theories

Through the lens of Dell Hymes' *Ethnography of Speaking* (1962), I have argued that the evolution of obscenity as a language adaptation in the seafood-processing community is a reaction to the setting and type of work that defines the space. Individuals can establish themselves within the hierarchy of the speech community based on their knowledge and proficiency of this distinctive register (Hill 1982). Through the daily negotiation of their workplace identities, created by the purposeful exclusion or inclusion of others, individuals in this space have created a distraction for themselves in a normally dull environment (Hill 1982).

This system of seniority manipulation has set up a contradictory setting that situates solidarity against personal prestige (Hill 1982). When workers with higher seniority ostracize those with less seniority from the workspace by utilizing this register against them, the cohesiveness of the team diminishes. In this way, by attempting to authenticate themselves through isolating and estranging others, participants sacrifice the solidarity of their speech communities and social relationships (Hill 1982; Uran pers. comm. Sept 30 2011). Hence, members of the speech community must balance such systems to function to their own individual needs and desires, which allows for a certain saliency in the language register use (Uran pers. comm. Sep 16 2011). Likewise, to succeed in this specific speech community and register requires that an individual have a set of competencies to deal with situational context. Therefore, individuals seeking to enter the register require that they be somewhat predisposed to discarding status-quo beliefs concerning an ideal, pure language, and society (Uran pers. comm. Oct 7 2011).

On a much greater scale, this obscene register may also be the result of an indirect indexicality: a negative subconscious association towards the presence of women in the workplace (Hill 2005). This is attributable to the recent history and ongoing attitudes of sexism and discrimination in the public space (Hill 2005; Wierzbicka 2002; Khosroshani 1989). This history of obscene and sexual language employed across sexes in the past has only recently been replaced by current employment policies that have only superficially disposed of prejudicial language. Such historical presumptions likely still linger within the workplace, and may translate into the creation of female gendered hierarchies. While women might use obscene language with the palpable belief that they apply it to “toughen” one another up, strengthen friendships, or humour themselves, this derogatory language may undermine their intentions by being established in an indirect indexicality which perpetuates intolerant, sexist conceptions (Hill 2005; Uran pers. comm. Sept 23 2011). For example, within this unique workplace register, the most appropriate obscenities were those of a sexist nature, versus racist obscenities. This history and continued sexist language use in the workplace may reveal a meta-language about how society has valued and judged the female gender in the workspace (Wierzbicka 2002; Uran pers. comm. Sept 28 2011). These factors may also translate into why there has been a creation for competitive gendered hierarchies within the speech community as females still seek to validate and substantiate their presence through competing with each other.

I approach my experience and thesis with the bias of an individual who had fully integrated into what I perceived to be a speech community (Khosroshani 1989). Individuals who chose not to assimilate into this register may have had a completely positive, independent experience while not being engaged with the language dominant of the space. The conception that the workplace comprises of a speech community is an assumption from an “insider” whose opinions may be a reaction to validate such a supposed register. On the other hand, my co-workers may have also been in the process of actively resisting such a register, and whether this is still an interaction within the greater speech community is debatable.

From my observation, those who often resisted this register were younger, only seasonally employed workers, who did not have as much personal time invested into the workplace. Perhaps, for those employees engaged long-term and year-round, these relationships and distractions were more important to the development of their personal workplace identities as much of their time and energy was devoted to the area.

Conclusion

The creation of personal identities is greatly influenced by the language that we speak (Sapir-Whorf 1956). In this workplace setting, employees enter into a unique process of acculturation (Lybeck 2002). Through a combination of both subliminal and deliberate actions a distinct register has developed within the seafood-processing establishment, which employees then apply as a tool to cope with their setting and achieve their individual motives. Concealed factors such as the historical indirect indexicality of sexism and the construction of seniority-based relationships are conceivable contributing influences for the obscene register, while humor and entertainment are most definitely participating components of its development. Overall, these mannerisms have led to a predominant language ideology within the space, built from unique instrumentalities and a saliency shaped by individual experiences that reject social norms of language prestige and create a linguistic commonality for employee interaction.

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