

“How to analyze authority and power in interaction” ICA Pre-Conference

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Multiple and contested authorities: On superdiversity and enoughness

Abstract

In the film *The Madness of King George*, the King’s son wants the throne. He has declared King George mentally ill, handed him over to hapless physicians, and isolated him from the Queen. In an exchange that illustrates semantic recontextualization, the Queen asks her son “On whose authority” he is acting. His reply: “On medical authority. On the authority of the son, who cares for his sick father.” As with the authorization of mental illness as consequential and actionable within a helping discourse of *caring* for the *sick* (and therefore those who can self-identify as caring and declare others as sick) the ratification of a social practice rests on the materialization (Cooren, 2015) of a logic of authority.

Though no one approach can say everything there is to say about an interaction (see Bucholz, 2007, on the positives of this), my approach to discourse is synthetic. Here, I adapt Blommaert’s (Blommaert & Rampton, 2011; Blommaert & Varis, 2011) *superdiversity* and *enoughness* as heuristics to first reframe the question “under whose authority” and then address how speakers mobilize a plurality of *authorities*, and, concurrently, how they contest others’ authenticity as representatives of the authorities they stand for. In Blommaert’s work, *superdiversity* refers to the dislocation of identities, or a speaker’s ability to switch footing, register, genre, viewpoint, speaking position, and therefore belong to several identity categories at once (Agha, 2007), making cohere what may not necessarily be congruent. Notice how David, White, Beige and Other (grouped together for simplicity) call on diverse repertoires of identity in their request/directive for a marriage license. The men speak: as a married couple, as partners in a relationship, as employees who *own* their salary, as knowers of God, ethics, the legal process, politeness, and rights to occupy a public space and so on. Likewise and surprisingly, Kim has equal ability to occupy a variety of moral speaking positions and dispute marriage, establish God, the meaning of respect space, legality, work, and so on. In identifying as speakers who belong to various epistemic and evidential categories, David, White, Beige, Kim, and Other speak in the name of and for the authorization of one version of marriage, God, work, civic duty.

Enoughness has to do with questioning this very process of standing and speaking. *Enoughness* asks: Are you enough/too much of _____ to speak in the name of _____? For example, are you too much of a bigot to speak for God? Not enough of a loving woman to speak for marriage? Not enough of a circuit court employee to earn your pay/uphold the law? Not enough of a man to marry a woman?

I propose an analysis of how authorities are ordered (if provisionally) in terms of enoughness in a superdiverse social world. I also attend how authorities manifest in the desk that divides the speakers, in the flash and noise of the cameras, in hands sometimes reaching across the desk, in the license. Though “God does not belong in the County Clerk’s office” the fate of the argument rests as much in not moving from the desk, as it does on standing by copiers and doors.

References

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