

Who speaks for God?: The power of the ethnography of communication for examining
language-in-society

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In what kind of a society does invoking God's authority and one's religious beliefs make sense as a legitimizing move? Who is privileged in this kind of speech? In this abstract I propose that the ethnography of communication seeks to provide answers to these questions derived from the interaction of Kim Davis and other clerks denying a same-sex couple a marriage license in the presence of protestors and the media. I discuss one way in which power has been theorized in the ethnography of communication, outline the kind of analysis I could produce, and finally discuss the limitations this data poses for using the ethnography of communication.

The ethnography of communication has been criticized for not attending to power and politics (Fiske, 1990, 1991). These critiques, however, tend to only focus on what ethnographers of communication in the communication discipline have attended to in the larger program developed by Hymes and his colleagues (see Gumperz & Hymes, 1972). In an often un-cited piece in the communication discipline, Hymes (1973) argues that ethnographers of communication need to pay attention to "what users have made of [language]" (p. 60). Hymes examines speech, and more broadly communication, as "language-in-society" (Blommaert, 2009, p. 264). This orientation to language "deeply situates language in a web of relations of power, a dynamics of availability and accessibility, a situatedness of single acts vis-à-vis larger social and historical patterns" (Blommaert, 2009, p. 264). Language cannot be separated from society or its context.

Language, “shaped by its history and patterns of use,” can thus be shaped in the interests of a powerful few (Hymes, 1973, p. 73). The political dimensions of the program Hymes proposed call on ethnographers to determine to what extent language use has become a problem, for whom, and how it has been approached or overcome by scholars and practitioners.

An analysis informed by the political dimension of Hymes’s ethnography of communication would examine the data provided as evidence of such language-in-society. I seek to answer: Who has the availability and accessibility to speak on behalf of God and assert his authority? In this excerpt, Kim Davis and other people who work in the office have this kind of speech accessible to them.

My analysis would first outline how God and beliefs are talked about in this excerpt, who uses this kind of speech, and who cannot. For example, in line 46 Kim says that she is not issuing marriage licenses “under God’s authority.” This provides a figure with greater power that grants her with such authority, and perhaps greater power than the United States government and courts. Kim and other clerks are the only people in this interaction who claim such religious beliefs, whereas the couple trying to get their license and audience members actively disclaim holding those beliefs.

Next, I would turn my attention to the “larger social and historical patterns” in which this speech is situated. In the broader conversation around same-sex marriage rights, those who speak on behalf of God tend to be those who oppose same-sex marriage. “Freedom of religion” was often cited as an argument against same-sex marriage (Tracy & Hughes, 2014). Furthermore, in the not-so-distant American past,

homosexual sex was strongly considered a sin and this sentiment likely influence the legislation against such acts in many states. Therefore, this kind of speech is likely to index anti-same-sex marriage sentiment, and furthermore is associated with the power cultivated through this history of those who use this speech. This could work to overpower other voices, as it does in this interaction, which results in the clerks successfully refusing marriage licenses to a same-sex couple.

This section, however, is where I face the limits of this data in trying to use the ethnography of communication. Usually, I need at least multiple instances of this talk, and preferably I would spend time in the community in order to ground my analysis of this excerpt in the broader interactional patterns of the community. I could achieve some of this grounding through similarly recorded conversations or reports of this kind of talk in news stories or accounts. Although not ideal, as a person raised Christian and American, I do understand at least some of the larger social and historical context in which this speech makes sense. This background provides me with experiential knowledge that I could use to bolster my analysis of religious belief used in language-in-society.

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