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Patricia T. McNaughton

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TALKING MORMON: ORDINARY LANGUAGE FOR SPECIAL PURPOSES

Patricia T. McNaughton

"Many are called, but few are chosen." If you are a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, you probably have a semantic knowledge of that motto divergent from the understanding of the general population. Learning to speak in the contextual lexicon of a group, religious or secular, is one essential requirement of long-term membership in that group.

Many ordinary verbalizations in English have idiosyncratic significance within particular institutionalized religions. This paper will present a study of one type of speech behavior, that of oral testimony among Mormons, as the accomplishment of communicative performance in an ecological setting for religious behavior. Three models for the analysis of talk in a religious setting will be described: ethnomethodology, discourse analysis, and sociolinguistics. We will apply these systems to a discussion of how oral testimony among Mormons displays claims of transcendent knowledge and also serves as a social device for maintenance of group cohesion.

This presentation is part of a larger study of language functions and stylistics among members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. The data mentioned here are preliminary in nature, meant to be illustrative rather than definitive. The research is being conducted in Southern California, and the method of data collection is that of participant observation. The study thus far is based on three years of participation in the formal and informal activities of one stake of the Mormon church, which included Sunday services, Sunday School, special lectures, informal conversations with members, and correspondence. A literature research was also conducted of official church publications, and ex officio and "underground" materials.

Theories of Language in Use

Speech acts are multi-functional and dynamic in character. That is to say, the process of discourse cannot be analyzed merely by examining grammatical sequences. An utterance may be considered for its semantic intention, its illocutionary power, its interactive effects, or its discursive relationship to other utterances. Attention may also be given to inappropriate silences, deviation or absence of expected discourse sequencing, theme alteration or interruption, manifest and covert power strategies, or message misinterpretation.

One approach to the study of language in use is that of ethnomethodology, which treats verbal interaction in Austin's (1962) sense of talk as the "doing of activities," and from the ordinary language dictum that activities are done in and by the talk that speakers and listeners use.

Harvey Sacks (1974) and his associates (Sacks, Scheggloff, & Jefferson, 1974) have developed a theory of "naturally occurring" conversational sequences based on Austin's model. The rule-generated parameters include: (1) only one speaker talks at a time, and (2) speaker change recurs. By treating the commonplace particulars of talk as problematic, as formal linguistic theory does not, Sacks has been able to uncover the formal operations used by members to accomplish conversation.

Ethnomethodology does not assume a normative model of behavior, but instead posits situations as context-bound. The method of interpretation is that of indexical documentation. Verbal reference to rules as explanations for prior or future behavior are indexical performances relevant to the particular context in which they occur rather than actual explanations of other events. For example, an explanation to a church leader as to why one has not been attending Sunday services is a constitutive feature of the dialogue with the official rather than of nonattendance itself.

Another approach to the study of language in use is that of discourse analysis (Russell, 1976; Candlin & Green, 1977). Such an analysis considers linguistic units above the rank of clause, and their sequences within the context of situation and existential meaning. John Regan (1979) describes nine systems of discourse analysis used by international researchers for the study of such subjects as child language, classroom interaction, and routinized verbal exchanges. Discourse analysis has also contributed to development of materials for teaching English as a second language and technological English for foreign professions (e.g., Lezberg, A., & Hilferty, A., 1978).

In addition to ethnomethodology and discourse analysis, sociolinguistics concerns itself with the sociocultural framework of verbal interaction (Trudgill, 1974). The sociolinguist's task involves making an in-depth study of selected "naturally occurring" instances of conversational interaction, to observe whether or not actors understand each other, and to describe the process of the mutual negotiation of a definition of a social situation (Schenkein, 1978). The priority given to the situated communicative event makes possible an understanding of what is accomplished and how it is accomplished.

Oral Testimony in the Mormon Church

Oral testimonies provide an accessible means to discover how theoretical religious precepts are internalized into a personal framework which may then be articulated by reference to experience. Oral religious testimonies are routine, public communications of personal experience (Dolgin, 1974). Though governed by specifiable norms of performance and interpretation, they permit a personalized framework for expressing one's transcendent feelings regarding everyday routines.

The philosophical framework for this approach to oral testimony is that of phenomenology, especially the concept of "multiple realities"

put forth by Alfred Schutz (1962, 1970). In Schutz's theory, reality is considered to be a negotiable condition, generated through an ongoing creative process without a priori determinacy. Speech is a constituent uncovering feature which displays the person's assumptions about reality to himself and others.

According to Schutz, we experience the common everyday world as determined by that which transcends our immediate bodily experience. That which seems to transcend our experience of being in the world may be formulated within any one of many finite provinces of meaning. As Joseph Childton Pearce suggests in The Crack in the Cosmic Egg (1971), "Any world view is a creative tension between possibility and choice."

Culture and language affect one's world view and influence the value of choice, shaping our assumptions into a non-ambiguous notion of a real world of events outside of our perception of it. Language first shapes one's view of reality, then the individual uses that language to express his understanding of the world. In this way, the act of speaking is itself reflexive, reinforcing the world view it expresses. It is in this way that oral religious testimony of belief claims influence the reality of others and also reinforce that same reality in oneself (see, for example, Langer, 1962; and de Chardin, 1960).

The speaker of an oral testimony stands in a relationship of authority to the other members of the congregation. That is, he is accepted as an expert on his own experience. The speaker presents information to the other members under the assumption that it may be directly instructional, or that the contents may serve as a model of what may be appropriate items to mention in a testimony, or to make public a private experience. We shall have more to say about this further on.

The oral testimony of a member of the Mormon church involves the verbal expression of a disciplined reordering of individual life process, based on a reality which unites those individuals who share that knowledge as a group, legitimated in terms of that group reality.

Another study of oral testimony involving claims of transcendent knowledge is that of Demarest (1975), who did research with the First Church of Christ, Scientist, whose members are known as Christian Scientists. Demarest points out that "one immediate and identifying feature of Christian Science oral testimonies is the repetitious use of key words and phrases peculiar to the Christian Science milieu."

M. A. K. Halliday has referred to this phenomenon in his article entitled "Anti-Languages" (1976). An anti-language orients, or foregrounds, certain words common in ordinary language, by giving them idiosyncratic meanings in particular social settings of a cohesive group divergent from the majority culture. Another feature of what Halliday terms anti-language is a characteristic functional orientation toward the interpersonal and textual modes. The interpersonal mode is the "set" toward the listener, and the textual orientation is the "set" toward the message. The need for a specialized argot or divergent meanings for ordinary words arises from an urgency to maintain group internal cohe-

sion and solidarity under pressure for dispersal or destruction engendered by the dominant society. A common motto among Mormons is "to be in the world, but not of the world."

The social accomplishment of the speech event of "giving a testimony," and simultaneously giving a display of identification with a shared reality of transcendent meaning requires "background" knowledge (e.g., what do I know or believe to be the case that is appropriate to this occasion), and "foreground" knowledge (e.g., do I feel that today I will give a testimony).

Claims of transcendent knowledge can be verified through its effect upon behavior, or through empirical facts which are to be interpreted through the filter of specialized, non-empirical knowledge (Polanyi, 1958, 1966; Samarin, 1972). The shift from expression of everyday meanings to claims of transcendent meanings involves an adjustment in both cognition and language use.

There are two possible approaches to accomplishing this shift: (a) using the register of a specialized jargon, which provides linguistic cues to apprehension of the transcendent domain and verbal display of facility with these terms; or (b) the invocation of a set of rules for interpreting everyday language with divergent semantic meanings. These two strategies, taken together, may serve as markers of the transcendent domain. Shifting between the two provinces - the ordinary and the transcendent, emphasizes the differences between commonsense interpretations of mundane reality and the specialness of the indexed reality.

This is not to say that members of the Mormon church live in two separate realms of meaningfulness - one of everyday affairs and pragmatic considerations, and the other an isolated sanctuary of emotional satisfaction. Oral testimonies are, instead, an accessible display of the language and interpretive rules by which these cognitive shifts are collapsed into one reality.

While each testimony verbalizes a personal cognitive transformation, it is simultaneously a social accomplishment. That is, the "doing" of an oral testimony is a public, reconstitutive and celebrative accomplishment which contributes to the production and maintenance of a particular interpretation of how it is to be in the world. Addressed to both members and investigators of the church, this type of speech act instructs covertly the process of formulation and evocation of private knowledge and interpretation of mundane experience.

In this verbalization, the discourse has the illocutionary force of both a response and a performative (Dore, 1977). It is a response to the invitation by the church leadership on the particular occasion, and in the general encouragement to give oral testimonies on any appropriate occasion when one is moved to do so.

A testimony is a performative in that it accomplishes the speaker's claim that he has a testimony to give that is a valid display of "doing" such a speech act as a member of the Mormon church. Testimony also has

the illocutionary force of description. Certain events, situations, or persons are identified as proper items to be included in a person's oral testimony by the speaker himself.

Consummation of the illocutionary act of the testimony is accomplished by the other members of the congregation by virtue of attendance at the service. Relevant beliefs are assumed to be shared by the members, and it does not require the active listening of everyone but the speaker to accomplish the perlocutionary effect of the testimony. That is, the contextual features relevant to the status of giving the testimony are sufficient to complete the illocutionary force of the act (Lewis, 1972; Dore, 1977).

An especially interesting performative aspect of Mormon oral testimony is in the use of pronoun referents. The persons mentioned in a testimony are not addressed directly, other than second person plural when addressing the congregation as a whole. God and individuals, whether present in the service or absent from it, are referred to in the third person, singular or plural. The speaker believes that his testimony accrues benefit to himself and the other persons present, and that one primary purpose, as often explicitly mentioned, is to give public thanksgiving to God. Apparently, the speaker believes that God overhears, or is actively involved as an additional, albeit superordinate, listener to his utterance.

The uncovering of God as involved listener to testimonies reveals them to be performatives in a here-and-now frame of reference. The speaker is not saying, "God, I'm letting these people know that I'll be praying to you about these things I'm telling them now," nor is he telling the membership what he will be doing and thereby making a public promise to relate this content to God. Instead, the speaker is in effect saying to the membership, "By telling you what I want God to know and what I want you to know, I am performing/accomplishing both purposes simultaneously." In this way Mormon oral testimony enacts multi-layered "doings": expressions of internalized knowledge claims, information to the membership, and prayer to God.

Summary

In this paper, we have been noticing members' procedures for accomplishing Mormon oral testimony. The idea has been put forward that a religious speech performance may be an enactment of claims of transcendent knowledge, and also a reconstitutive act of intersubjective consensus about reality. This report on the research is in the spirit of "work in progress." It is hoped that these remarks will interest fellow researchers to "lengthen your stride" in exploration of man's most abiding and satisfying activity - the "doing" of religion.

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