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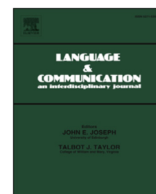

Talk as work: Economic sociability in Northern Italian heritage food production

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A B S T R A C T

This article analyzes talk occurring within direct marketing contexts (farmers markets) as a form of economic sociability: interaction among people and goods within production, circulation, and exchange processes that constructs relationships and creates meaning and value simultaneously. It builds on and contributes to scholarly conversations about the role and value of language within political economies, such as language commodification, branding and marketing, and language and materiality. It focuses on transcripts drawn from recordings made during ethnographic and linguistic anthropological fieldwork with heritage food producers carried out in the northern Italian town and province of Bergamo to show how talk among producers and their customers is both a social act and an economic practice.

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"First, they look at your face, and then they look at your products before they decide to buy something," Donatella told me as we worked together at her farmers market stand in northern Italy. Earlier, I'd listened to Donatella compare aches and pains with a middle-aged female customer with her arm in a sling, as she weighed out links of sausages for the customer, and made change. Her observation now was a reflection on how important a social connection was to her customers, one that I saw was facilitated through talk such as this. Indeed, over the course of the spring of 2013, when I assisted Donatella at her stand at this and other markets as part of my ethnographic and linguistic anthropological field research with northern Italian heritage food producers, I observed or was part of numerous exchanges that were as social as they were economic, as Donatella asked after children ("how's my name-sake?" she once jokingly asked an older man whose son, I learned later, was named Donatello), joined in complaining about the near-constant rain, or updated clients on how her own son's broken ankle was mending. The extremely small-scale of Donatella's business meant that she participated in (alone or with her teen-age children) every stage of production and exchange; customers at markets like this one came at least in part because of the small-scale nature of Donatella's and the other vendor's production, so as to be able to interact with the people who were making the salamis or growing the vegetables. In this type of context, talk helped to enable moments of exchange, as small talk about the weather could lead to sales, and sales seemed to lead to ongoing conversations and regular customers. Recalling Goffman's (1967) seminal notion of 'face"—roughly, the public display of self—'face' in Donatella's comment above was short-hand for her and her stand's overall appearance, and certainly included her ability to engage in such talk. In this way, talk was a social, but also an economic practice, an essential part of Donatella's—as well as that of the other small-scale producers with whom I did research—labor processes.

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This article materializes Bourdieu's (1977, 1991) notion of the linguistic market, grounding it in the specific time and space of the farmers market, focusing specifically on the linguistic labor that contributes to value production during exchange. As numerous scholars have shown, language used within the commodity chain process is not auxiliary to or descriptive of production, circulation, or exchange, but rather integral to such processes (see also Heller, 2010; Heller et al. 2014; Lorente, 2012; Shankar and Cavanaugh, 2012). In focusing on what Boutet (2012) calls 'the language part of work', here I analyze talk and the relationships it facilitates during contexts of exchange, noting as well that similar dynamics are threaded throughout the various stages of production for all of the food producers with whom I do research; they talk not only with customers, but also with suppliers, other producers, government officials, and various types of inspectors. For these small-scale producers, such talk is essential: while they cannot be fired for doing it the wrong way—which may be the fate of call center workers, for instance, who fail to address clients 'with a smile in their voice' (Cameron, 2000)—their financial security and success may be deeply reliant on being able to build in-the-moment interactions into ongoing relationships through talk. For instance, Pietro, another small producer with whom I worked, who distributed his goods via restaurants and specialty food shops rather than farmers markets, seemed to be on a first name basis with every restaurateur in town. '*Che bravo ragazzo*!' one of these restaurant owners told me about him when I asked about his suppliers, 'what a great guy!' Oh, he added, almost as an afterthought, his products are delicious, too. Such comments indicated that at least part of why this restaurant served these particular foods was because of certain of Pietro's personal characteristics—his face—and the nature of their relationship, not just the predictable high quality of his goods. And indeed, Pietro often remarked to me how much of his day was filled up with phone calls to clients, suppliers, and other interlocutors essential to his growing business. Talk, in other words, was a key part of how he, like Donatella, did business.

1. Language and social and economic exchange

Small-scale producers, such as the ones with whom I work, have long been recognized as relying on personalistic relations as economic strategy (Gates, 2005; Smart and Smart, 2005). Indeed, such relationships have sometimes been described as instrumental, and seen as different than personal or non-economic relationships, in that they are undertaken to further economic ends. But such an analytical distinction may erase interesting similarities and overlaps across various types of interactions and relationships, as well as foreclose inquiries into how relationships are constructed and what they mean to and do for participants. Anthropologists such as Heather Paxson (2013) and Sylvia Yanagisako (2002) have explicitly approached market and non-market relations within the same analytic frame, seeing the relationships formed among people within production as a complicated layering of personal, familial, market, and other types of connections. As Simone Ghezzi (2005) has observed about labor in an adjoining region of Italy, many economic relationships are also personal, but additionally that personal relationships within labor contexts affect the way labor proceeds. Ghezzi (2005:106) states that, within the dense social and working networks that characterize business among small-scale entrepreneurs in this area, "stiff penalties for late deliveries are possible, but never apply to long-term subcontractors: where personal relationships are involved, formal rules such as this cannot be enforced." Where the personal and the economic overlap, then, there tends to be more flexibility and allowance for variations in performance. While Ghezzi, as well as Paxson and Yanagisako, are mainly looking at how the personal and the economic interact within production processes, that is, at stages of production prior to exchange, an intertwining of the personal and the economic may permeate as well moments of exchange, perhaps especially in the contexts that I look at, in which small-scale producers sell their own goods, a point I elaborate below.

This intertwining happens in large part through talk, and thus requires an interactionist approach in order to analyze the particular linguistic strategies and features at work in this process. In the interactions I analyze here, talk adds value to commodities by embedding them within social relationships but also by casting a degree of authenticity upon them. This association between language and authenticity is a common dynamic in contemporary capitalism, as the use of particular languages within labor processes becomes valued not just as a skill, but also as a marker of quality, connection, and location (Heller, 2010). Numerous scholars have documented the role of language as contributing to—or complicating—commodities' value from the point of view of consumption (Gaudio, 2003; Manning, 2012; Manning and Meneley 2008; Shankar, 2006) as well as in terms of branding processes (e.g., Cavanaugh and Shankar, 2014; Lury, 2006; Manning, 2010; Moore, 2003; Nakassis, 2012; Shankar, 2012). Likewise, scholarship on the commodification of language itself (Duchêne and Heller, 2012; Heller, 2003, 2010) has demonstrated the increasing importance of language as a skill that workers must acquire (Hall 1995; Heller et al. 2014; Lorente, 2012), or which they already have as native speakers, allowing them to participate in particular labor markets (e.g., Boutet, 2012; Da Silva et al. 2007; Duchêne and Heller, 2012; Heller, 2011). Such work demonstrates that the "language part of labor" (Boutet, 2012) is an increasingly vital part of contemporary global economies. This is true across a range of labor settings, including those which are not just service-based—where the role and value of talk is obvious—but also those in which material processes may seem much more essential than linguistic ones, such as food production. In conjunction with contemporary capitalism's increasing incorporation of what were once non-market interactions, aspects of self, and skills into the market (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2009; Ganti, 2014; Gershon, 2011; Harvey, 2005; Urciuoli, 2008), language practices increasingly interact with the material qualities of commodities within the commodity chain process to produce value and shape exchange.

I offer the analytic concept of *economic sociability* as a way to analyze these interactions among people and goods within production, circulation, and exchange processes as simultaneously social and economic. Economic sociability, put simply, is interaction that, like the anecdote that opened this article, is at once social and economic, creating meaning and value

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