Language & Communication 33 (2013) 317–325

Contents lists available at SciVerse ScienceDirect

Language & Communication

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/langcom

Suspicious minds: Problems of cooperation in a Lio ceremonial council

Adam Harr *

Department of Anthropology, St. Lawrence University, 23 Romoda Drive, Canton, NY 13617, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online 13 September 2011

Keywords:
Intersubjectivity
Intentionality
Suspicion
Cooperation
Ritual speech

ABSTRACT

I analyze a case of rampant suspicion, and its resolution, in the council meetings of a Lio village in central Flores, eastern Indonesia. I argue that suspicion in this sociocultural setting is a mode of intersubjectivity that is neither based on nor productive of either mutual understanding or cooperation. I show how ritualized speech eased the symptoms of suspicion on the council, if only provisionally, because the performative utterance presupposed, and thus reaffirmed, a fundamentally cooperative intersubjective moral order that had been brought into question.

Suspicions amongst thoughts, are like bats among birds, they fly ever by twilight.

Francis Bacon, "Of Suspicion"

1. Introduction

Discussions of intersubjectivity, especially those with an evolutionary focus (Tomasello et al., 2005), often point to shared intentions and cooperation as exemplars. But, as Duranti (2010, p. 14) points out, "Husserl's original concept is much broader in scope and does not require the achievement of shared agreement or mutual understanding." In this article, I call attention to suspicion as a form of intersubjectivity that decidedly undermines mutual understanding and cooperation among the Lio people of Flores island in eastern Indonesia. In addition to explicating the ways in which intention is attributed in suspicion, I also consider the forms of talk and interaction that are held to effectively mitigate this dangerous intersubjective state.

Suspicion and cooperation are regular topics of Lio commentary on the nature of social life. A common Lio joke is that people suffer from just three failings: "big liver" (L: *ate ria*[1]), "small liver" (L: *ate lo'o*), and "bad liver" (L: *ate re'e*). These are all synonyms for a hidden inner state of suspicious envy that is understood to be at the root of much social discord. Envy is necessarily correlated with suspicion (L: *leti*) because "small livered" people are understood to be envious of others' suspected rather than evident advantage. Such people are pantomimed as squinting at others with "cold eyes" (L: *mata keta*), trying to discern what wealth or secrets might be hidden. In addition, because envy can make the envied person sick, persons suffering from certain maladies often suspect others' envy as the cause. This sort of envy entwined with suspicion is cited by Lio people as a perennial source of people's failure to cooperate.

Cooperation is a broad term, and I signal at the outset that I follow Moll and Tomasello (2007) in approaching cooperation primarily as mutually supporting efforts towards a common goal. This definition has the virtue of corresponding with Lio understandings of cooperation, which I outline below. To be clear, I do not suggest that suspicion necessarily undermines

* Tel.: +1 434 242 3132; fax: +1 434 924 1350.
E-mail address: aph8u@virginia.edu

[1] Lionese words will be preceded by an L; Indonesian words will be preceded by an I.

0271-5309/$ - see front matter © 2011 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.
doi:10.1016/j.langcom.2011.08.003

Gricean cooperation (Grice, 1975), which may remain intact even in situations of mutual antagonism (but cf. Pagliai, 2010). Rather, I argue that, for Lio people, suspicion entails a particularly insidious kind of intention guessing that is at variance with local concepts of cooperation. Suspicions, if they are present, must be overcome or downplayed for cooperation to occur. One medium for this rapprochement is ritualized communication. Ritual serves this function, I argue, by foregrounding the evaluation of conventions over the interpretation of intentions (Danziger, 2006).

As a way into the thicket of Lio understandings of suspicion and cooperation, I analyze a case of rampant suspicion and its cooperative resolution in the ceremonial council meetings of a Lio village I will call Kelisoko[2]. These events unfolded when, for the first time, an accounting system was created to manage ceremonial costs, including the purchase of a water buffalo and several pigs for sacrifice and feasting. Until then, livestock had been pledged by individual members on the council floor; but now expenses were to be reckoned in terms of cash value, and the sum of costs was to be divided equally among the ceremonial leaders. Many on the council were suspicious of the motivations behind the new cash-based process. Some expressed misgivings about how the collected money would be stored and disbursed. Others went further, suggesting in private that the process manifested ghostly intentions to destroy ceremonial life in Kelisoko. A number of members on both sides of the debate suffered physical symptoms that were attributed to the council's suspicious mood, and council meetings soon fell into fruitless quarrelling. It seemed as if the consecration would have to be postponed indefinitely, a turn of events that would have seriously damaged the council's credibility. Senior council members criticized the new process by criticizing the "claptrap" or "empty talk" (I: *omong kosong*) they said it produced. This style of talk was described by one source as "we talk, but don't do anything—just talk." This was contrasted with "speaking boldly" (L: *gare bhani*), which was considered more suited to ceremonial matters because it ends talk by "just doing what needs to be done." Ultimately, the impasse was ended when sacrificial livestock were laid down in a performance of "bold speech."

Before analyzing the role of mutual suspicion in the conflict, and considering why bold speech was necessary to bring it to an end, I outline the social context in which these events occurred, paying particular attention to the religious concerns that motivated the dispute. I then sketch some aspects of Lio ways of orienting to other minds by analyzing two very different kinds of interaction: a brief, casual interaction between siblings on the one hand, and the extended, formal interactions of marriage exchange negotiation on the other. These different kinds of interaction illustrate the kinds of sociality that usually keep suspicion of other minds at bay.

2. Social setting

Lio is an ethnolinguistic designation claimed by approximately 171,000 people (Suryadinata et al., 2003). Most Lio people speak Indonesian in addition to a dialect of Lionese, an Austronesian language in the Central Malayo-Polynesian subgroup (Blust, 1993). The data I present here were collected primarily in a "village" (L: *nua*) I will call Kelisoko, a community of a few thousand people who make their living by cultivating rice, coffee, cloves, and candlenuts in the steep Florinese highlands.

Almost all inhabitants of Kelisoko participate to some degree both in Catholic sacraments and in ancestral rites. Ancestors are sometimes described as intercessors between the living and God. As one informant, a prominent member of the church whose son had recently been ordained into the priesthood, put it: "Where is God? But I can show you the graves of my father and his father." Ancestral rites pay homage to the dead, who gave to the living an ordered, habitable world. This is a world of agriculture, architecture, wisdom, and verbal riches, without which people would be pathetic, speechless creatures subsisting on bitter tubers and rotten wood in the bush. Life as we know it was made by those who came before us, and for this the living are obliged to "praise the ancestors" (L: *gare naja, keko tame*, i.e. "speak the names, name the titles").

Kelisoko is a "trunk village" (L: *nua pu'u*), which means that its lineage is narratable back to "primordial times" (L: *puu maru*), and that a number of subordinate villages can trace their lineage to it. These descendant villages are tied to Kelisoko by complex ritual obligations that extend the boundaries of Kelisoko as a ritual community well beyond the confines of the ancestral settlement itself. The visible sign of Kelisoko's status as a trunk village is a "temple" (L: *keda*) at its center. The temple's architecture recalls that of the first human dwelling and signifies an encompassing lineage that precedes factional concerns (Howell, 1995). After burning to the ground some decades prior, the temple was rebuilt in 2002. The social drama at the center of the present discussion revolves around the consecration of the rebuilt temple in 2007.

The body responsible for carrying out ceremonies of the temple is the "council of ceremonial leaders" (I/L: *musyawara mosa laki*). This council is composed primarily of the male heads of named "Houses" (L: *sa'o*) or their proxies. Ceremonial leaders (L: *mosa lakis*) meet on the long veranda of Kelisoko's Great House to plan village-wide ceremonies and to deliberate on the allocation of land, which the council is understood to hold in trust from founding ancestors. In the past, the council apparently had greater powers to settle disputes and punish crimes, but this authority has been ceded gradually to local police. The ceremonial leaders who largely make up the council are regarded as living surrogates for ancestors. Watching ceremonial leaders perform certain ritual tasks in a trancelike state, people will say, "they are the ancestors" (L: *ebe embu mamo*). A distinction is drawn between the office of ceremonial leader (L: *mosa laki*) and the person inhabiting the office (L: *ata laki*). Of the office, people say "it comes alone, without body" (L: *mai mesa, tebo iwa*), an esoteric phrase that attributes to the office a kind of autonomous existence, separate from the occupant.

[2] Because I discuss issues that might be embarrassing for my some of my informants, all proper names in this article have been substituted to maintain anonymity.