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Cricket bats, #riotcleanup, and rhubarb: Everyday creativity in Twitter interactions around Test Match Special

Julia Gillen

Lancaster University, UK

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ABSTRACT

Changes in society brought about by use of social media have reverberated in public sports discourse giving opportunities for performances of shared culture. I investigate everyday linguistic creativity in the communicative practices of Jonathan Agnew, a commentator for the British Broadcasting Corporation and his networked audiences through Twitter and the radio programme, Test Match Special (TMS). I explore how Agnew and others demonstrated linguistic creativity in situated interactions, transversing physical/digital boundaries that were entwined with specific socio-economic and historical contexts. Through the analysis of two topic clusters, I show how collaboratively constructed shared cultural understandings of the setting and flows across two media channels invoke complex chronotopes. Twitter performances of layered simultaneity are shown to be valued elements of creativity. This study contributes to current sociolinguistic research in expanding understandings of (i) everyday linguistic creativity as strategic performance in specific, complex contexts; (ii) how space and time can be discursively reworked in social media, sometimes presumed to be concerned with the present moment; and (iii) how flexible approaches to ethnography can contribute to such research.

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1. Introduction

In this paper I explore performances of everyday linguistic creativity and the evolution of relationships between professional commentary and audience, centred on English Test match cricket as discussed on a British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) radio programme and Twitter. The field of public sports media is one among many in which opportunities for interactions between professional commentators and audiences are being reconfigured (Boyle and Haynes, 2013). New spaces are being opened up for the performance of everyday creativity in displays of knowledge, wit and humour, including in interactions between professionals and their publics, hitherto largely separated.

Professional discourse is conventionally characterised by being located in specific situations, demarcated by time and space, and through identifiable goals (Gunnarsson, 2009). In sports commentary a goal is to make, and maintain over time, a space in which audiences can share the sense of being part of a community of aficionados (Schirato, 2013). For many decades in the twentieth century, professionals had relatively uncontested arenas in which to be authoritative, commanding the airwaves through their oral comments whether or not combined with visual elements, or through print and images in newspapers and specialist publications. Yet, nevertheless, a significant element of their activity was focussed not solely on competent and entertaining reporting, but also encouraging audience members to feel involved (Booth, 2008). They did offer

E-mail address: j.gillen@lancaster.ac.uk.

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spaces for members of audiences to interact with them but these were carefully regulated and demarcated in space and time, for example through letter columns and radio phone-ins. As digital communications began to permeate society, new channels such as email allowed ways for sports fans to have their say, although still in formats controlled by media professionals.

In recent years however social media platforms such as Twitter have engendered new ways for audience members to participate in public dialogues about sport. Such conversations do not only connect audience members to each other, potentially creating their own audiences in turn, but also facilitate dialogues with professional commentators, and even players. The sports media landscape is thus transformed, and has become a central element in many people's lives and their sense of identity (Boyle and Haynes, 2009). Much research has identified the opportunities created by social media to elicit or extend everyday performances into more public highly dialogic zones of interaction (Barton and Lee, 2013; Marwick and Boyd, 2010; Page, 2012). As Papacharissi (2012, p. 1990) declares, 'online social platforms collapse or converge public and private performances, creating both opportunities and challenges for pursuing publicity, privacy and sociality.' Papacharissi (2012) here draws on Goffman's (1959) broadening of the notion of performance from theatrical and related spheres to everyday life. Goffman (1959, p. 15) defines performance as 'all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants.' Such a focus on audience aligns with an understanding of language as dialogic, always situated not only in material characteristics of space and time, but as also dependent on participants' understandings (Volosinov, 1995).

This dialogicality in chains of communication is historically contingent and contains possibilities for interactions that may be intended and perceived as creative. Discussions of creativity in language have extended their reach into the everyday (Carter, 2004; Cook, 2000; Swann, 2006), while preserving a sense of artistry, of individual intent, that is also captured in the notion of performance. Furthermore, everyday linguistic creativity, the focus of the special issue to which this paper contributes, is always situated and needs to be examined 'in the dialectic between performance and its wider socio-economic context' (Bauman and Briggs, 1990, p. 61).

Sports media operate across channels and modes, with complex temporal, spatial and material/virtual dimensions of dialogues. Commentaries may draw on specificities of their physical and socio-political environments. Anchimbe (2008) discusses the use of terms such as "a banana shot" in football commentary in Cameroon and "a ground-to-ground missile" on the West Bank. He discusses too the effects of the affordances of the medium used, contrasting radio, television and loudspeaker commentaries. An important aspect of the medium is the extent to which it allows audience participation and how that is structured. Although Bauman and Briggs (1990, p. 63) were writing before the advent of the internet into society at large, let alone SMS, they noted that 'participation structure, particularly the nature of turn-taking and performer–audience interaction, can have profound implications for shaping social relations.' Professionals and fans shape their communications in accordance with the participation structure afforded to them by the channels they choose to interact with, their own purposes and understandings of cultural practices.

Everyday linguistic creativity emerges then from local understandings of the materiality of the channels, the cultural practices embodied by individuals and a dialogic attunement to other participants in the interaction (Maybin and Swann, 2007). As shall be discussed further below, an ethnographic stance is desirable to approach the complexities involved in investigating the communicative practices and viewpoints by participants who are tracked across various fields of their activities (Androutsopoulos, 2008; Hine, 2000; Pink et al., 2016).

2. Test Match Special, cricket and opportunities for linguistic creativity

There are three linked factors involved in shaping this setting for investigation of everyday performance, taking this as always contextualised in dynamic fashion, that is shaping and shaped in negotiations by participants in social interaction (Bauman and Briggs, 1990, p. 68). First, there is the nature of Test Match cricket itself and its relationship with the BBC. Second, Test Match Special (TMS), the BBC's radio programme, is embedded in a culture of multiple chronotopes, in which links are discursively constructed and frequently remade between moments, years and even decades. Third, innovations in social media have created new opportunities for prominent people to engage in 'celebrity as an organic and ever-changing performative practice...[t]his involves ongoing maintenance of a fan base, performed intimacy, authenticity and access, and construction of a consumable persona' (Marwick and Boyd, 2011, p. 140; emphasis as original). These are new spaces for dialogue with their audiences, and for those members of the audience to communicate with each other in networked audiences, including through creative performances. I will further elucidate these three factors or characteristics, before turning to the background of my project and the aims and methods of this paper in particular.

The first characteristic then of the cultural practice studied here, the networked audience around Jonathan Agnew, a BBC commentator, and Test cricket, is the socio-economic nature of the sport. Cricket is geographically constrained to certain countries of the world, especially members of the Commonwealth since it originated in Britain and was spread through colonialism. The game of cricket takes place in various formats: Test cricket, discussed here, is played over a maximum of five days between two international teams.¹ In England its long traditions and associations with the establishment mean that, in common

¹ Discussions of cricket in this paper should be understood as applying to international Test cricket played by men and not other formats or participants. These differ in virtually all dimensions including media interactions around them. As Watson (2011) notes, part of the distinctive character of Test cricket lies in 'othering' other forms, but this is not part of my purview here.

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