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Value and meaning: Paradoxes of religious diversity talk as globalized expertise

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ABSTRACT

Based on linguistic anthropological research conducted among British interfaith dialogue advocates, this article analyzes the changing value of "diversity talk" in the UK, highlighting new understandings of global religion as a source of communication anxiety. Paradoxically, British interfaith dialogue advocates promote Taylorist linguistic prescriptions for religious diversity management across the globe, yet flout the social stratification inherent in managerial logic. I analyze these globally shared techniques, revealing advocates' desire to upscale linguistic prescriptions from the vertical authority of clergy, local and state politicians to what they see as the highest scale: the global ecumene.

1. Introduction

This article analyzes the shifting meanings of "diversity talk" in the UK over the past two decades in order to reconsider more broadly the role globalized religion plays in the creation of new forms of expertise and linguistic value. I offer this case as one kind of expertise – interfaith dialogue – that flouts global capitalism yet still desires to "travel far from its interactional and institutional origin" (Carr, 2010:25). Anthropological studies of expertise link its creation to regimes of specialization and hoarding of linguistic capital, on one hand, and the ability to "naturalize the expertise that has been produced in real-time interactions between putatively expert people and potentially valuable objects, allowing it to float across evermore empowering contexts" (Carr, 2010:25) on the other. I argue that although British interfaith dialogue practitioners indeed seek to "float" their expertise across contexts, they largely ignore the logic of capital, freely disseminating their techniques on a global scale. Because they imagine communication disorders to be a primary cause of religious strife the world over, they share what they know about "better interfaith communication" with as many people as possible, offering free access to online resources, DVDs and workbooks that outline, step by step, how to talk across religious diversity and achieve better "disagreement success."[1]

This article suggests that our understanding of recent forms of British "diversity talk" benefits from deeper engagement with theories of language and globalization (Blommaert, 2010; Blommaert and Verschueren, 1998; Chambers et al., 2004; Fairclough, 2006; Friedman, 2003; Jacquemet, 2005; Jaworski and Thurlow, 2010) and linguistic commodification (Agha, 2011; Cavanaugh and Shankar, 2014; Heller, 2010; Kockelman, 2006). To understand how linguistic forms accrue value

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[1] "Disagreement success" is an agonistic form of communication advocated by St. Ethelburga's, a prominent British interfaith dialogue organization: "It may be some form of recognition that the different interests of antagonists in a dispute require some kind of mutuality. A successful disagreement opens up the complexity of real-life situations and creates space for people to develop their position and options by better understanding people who hold opposing views and maintaining relationships with them" (accessed 10/22/2014 12:31:34 PM www.stethelburgas.org/sites/stethelburgas.org/files/Disagreement%20Success.pdf).

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through globalization, scholars increasingly call for analyses of interactions that are "actively 'scale-sensitive', mindful of the transnational, national or local provenance or potential of a text or practice" (Blommaert and Rampton, 2011:10). Ethnography among British interfaith dialogue advocates reveals that they promote communication "skills" to manage religious diversity across both vertical scales of increasing power (for example, from neighborhood lay partners to clergy and national leadership) and horizontal ones of increasing geographic space (between religious communities, across cities, states and globally). As Blommaert argues, "(m)obility in a globalized world is predicated on the capacity to acquire and deploy resources needed to cross from one scale level to another (…)" (2013:8). What to make, then, of evidence of a globalized linguistic practice whose scale-crossing practices are seen as a kind of expertise that accrues *meaning* through its claim to be a public good that erases distinctions, rather than *value* as a resource to be deployed for purposes of increasing social stratification?

I focus here on the awareness of scale implicated in the valuation of religious diversity talk among British interfaith advocates. Against a backdrop of fieldwork and interviews with participants in London's interfaith dialogue scene, this article draws its evidence from my collection of British "best-practice" dialogue manuals, advertisements for interfaith dialogue events and interfaith dialogue course descriptions, many of which are made available for free online (either in PDF format, video or text on websites) by prominent British interfaith proponents. The global dissemination of these digitized texts, I argue, is central to these groups' broader mission. In this case, dissemination is both an active and passive practice that involves British actors conducting outreach to global partners as well as making these materials publicly available online. This mission envisions talk technologies for "managing" religious diversity as a public good rather than a form of capital, an expertise made meaningful by making it freely available – not only to their local, national or transnational communities but to the world at large.

This article thus aims to achieve two main goals: 1. to describe the multiple and competing values and meanings of diversity talk in the UK in recent decades, exploring how interfaith communication is described as a particular source of anxiety and 2. to show how the exportation of religious "diversity talk" (from the UK abroad) allows us to reconsider the creation of new kinds of global linguistic value, value derived from the somewhat paradoxical combination of practices that appear formally managerial but employed toward ends that builds more on a logic of gifting than that of capitalist accumulation.

To begin, I describe the historical moment in the UK in which "faith" became a kind of diversity to discuss, rather than to avoid. In particular, this shift reflects a national debate about how to define "Britishness" in light of global migration and state (and church) recognition of the power of transnational religion as a challenge to local authority. Through key example of an interfaith meeting in London, I show how interfaith dialogue participants value linguistic scale-sensitivity as a kind of expertise. I analyze my subjects' reliance on "bridging" metaphors in order to show how interfaith dialogue proponents *imagine* an increasingly complex globalized relationship between religious groups, states, communities and individuals. I then offer selections from British agencies' "best practice" guidelines for interfaith dialogue, materials well-suited for an analysis of ideologies of what religious diversity is (and does) as well the emphasis dialogue advocates put on "good communication" as a skill. A second field observation in which British interfaith dialogue experts train American schoolteachers provides evidence of the challenges of cross-scale contextualization, especially when different states (the UK and the US) are invoked as "language codifying agencies" (Blommaert, 2007). I offer examples, culled from publicly available documents describing the values and goals of British interfaith dialogue organizations, of dialogue advocates' strong internal critique of the instrumentalization of dialogue for political or financial gain (as well as other forms of power plays or domination). As I show, the globally shared techniques under analysis reveal how "upscaling," a practice that garners power vertically and horizontally, eventually bypasses state-level authority. My analysis of discussions of optimal interfaith dialogue reveal that upscaling, for these actors, means working with powerful people and agencies (clergy, the mayor and even the State) but, for them, God is the ultimate linguistic authority, the unique judge of the value (and meaning) of interfaith dialogue. I then consider the seemingly paradoxical relationship between the global promotion of formally Taylorist diversity management techniques and the anti-authoritarian ethos of British interfaith dialogue organizations. The article concludes by suggesting that this case invites comparison: What (if any) other globalized linguistic strategies embrace classic Taylorist forms but reject their hegemonic meaning (capital extraction through ever-increasing social distinction)?

2. Religious diversity in the UK

> We are called to discipleship in very different contexts around the world today, but in every place we encounter religious diversity and complexity. (…)Through migration and mission, faiths once largely confined to one part of the world have become worldwide in their distribution, while formerly homogeneous societies and neighbourhoods have become marked by diversity of religions (…). Christian faith is a gift we can easily take for granted, and at the same time we can begin to regard it as our own possession. It can be an experience of renewal to be reminded by others both of its life-giving value for us, and of its free availability to all. In this way, our presence among people of other faiths becomes for us a journey into a deeper understanding of who we are (…) We believe that in Christ God has come among us as a human living among humans, and as one who in his humanity crossed the boundaries which separated people of different groups from one another (The Anglican Consultative Council, 2008:3; 9–10).

The above statements, drawn from "Generous Love," an Anglican Church position paper on interfaith relations (The Anglican Consultative Council 2008), illustrate a number of recent historical shifts in the meanings of "diversity" in elite