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Reconsidering communicative competence in Web 2.0 environments: "Asians in the library" and four parodic responses on YouTube

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

By analyzing five viral YouTube videos, I reconsider the notion of communicative competence (CC). Specifically, I examine a rant video, which has been widely circulated as "Asians in the library", and four parodic responses to it, by focusing on reported speech. I suggest that the notion of CC be conceptualized as multiple competences in a heterogeneous speech community in which there are multiple norms. At the same time, each poster is highly constrained by such factors as gender and race and by the technological design of YouTube within which she has agency. Finally, I argue for a cognitive anthropological conceptualization of CC, which posits the shared understanding of stereotypes among a group of people.

1. Introduction

The goal of this article is to reconsider the notion of communicative competence (Hymes, 1972) (henceforth, CC) by analyzing five viral YouTube videos: the original and four parodic responses.[1] The original was posted by Alexandra Wallace, a white female student at the University of California, Los Angeles, whose rant video entitled "Asians in the library" has been largely regarded as prejudiced against Asians. This controversial video generated various responses. People who responded include local stakeholders such as UCLA Chancellor Gene Block and UCLA students, both Asian and non-Asian, as well as national and global viewers of the video. Among these responses, I selected four parodies based on popularity, and social and personal identity, or the ones that are frequently viewed and highly rated while using two sociological categories: gender (man/woman) and "race" (white/Asian). Thus I analyze four response videos posted by white and Asian males, and white and Asian females.[2]

Based on my analysis, I discuss implications for reconsidering the notion of CC in "Web 2.0 environments" (Androutsopoulos, 2010) in which a politicized conceptualization of CC becomes relevant (Besnier, 2013). At the same time, I argue that we should uncover underlying cognitive assumptions, in particular widely shared racial stereotypes, in a "heterogeneous speech community" (Hymes, 1972, p. 274). By "underlying cognitive assumptions" I refer to the cognitive anthropological

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[1] By September 30, 2012, Alexandra Wallace's original video (or four versions uploaded by four different users) has been viewed 3,010,075 times and had generated 5476 likes and 59,816 dislikes; the response by a white man (Logan Sexy Back) has been viewed 222,868 times and had generated 2471 likes and 121 dislikes; the response by an Asian man (Xuyah) has been viewed 969,476 times and had generated 15,852 likes and 416 dislikes; the response by a white woman (snoeblac) has been viewed 504,247 times and had generated 2757 likes and 537 dislikes; the response by an Asian woman (The Angelie Vaudeville) has been viewed 759,280 times and had generated 11,142 likes and 583 dislikes.

[2] By "race", I refer to sociopolitically constructed categories (e.g., white, black, Asian, etc.), which are produced and reproduced on a daily basis and may have material consequences (e.g., residential segregation). Of course, I do not recognize "race" as a biological fact, although it may cause biological effects such as a higher rate for hypertension and diabetes among African Americans due to stress and other factors (Hill, 2008, p. 13). In what follows, I use the concept of "race" in this sense without quotation marks.

definition of "culture", which is stated as "largely tacit, taken-for-granted, and hence invisible assumptions that people share with others of their group" (Quinn, 2005, p. 3). Theoretically, cognitive anthropologists posit mental structures called "schemas", which play a mediating role in producing and interpreting discourse (Strauss and Quinn, 1997). In the present context, if YouTube posters and viewers had not cognitively internalized racial stereotypes as cultural schemas, they would not have been able to exchange ideas meaningfully in the video responses and comments.

In analytic terms, I focus on the moments in which the four posters respond to Alexandra Wallace's mock "imitation" of how she thinks "Asians" sound ("Oh, ching chong ling long ting tong, oh").[3] Inspired by Jane H. Hill's (1995a) analysis of "Mock Spanish", I call Wallace's mockery "Mock Asian", which, in the imagination of monolingual white speakers of English, is a socially constructed ethnoracial language spoken by all Asians.[4] In my analysis, I illuminate the differential competence (Hymes, 1972) of each poster. By "differential competence" I refer to two distinct but interrelated aspects: (1) the different ability of each individual to produce appropriate utterances on YouTube; (2) multiple norms for evaluating a given video as (in)appropriate among the viewers. The constraints and affordances of Web 2.0 environments further complicate the notions of "competence" and "appropriateness".

The original video has a narrative structure in which denials of racism constitute the basic patterning in the reproduction of racial stereotypes about Asians. The rant culminates in reported speech in Mock Asian. Furthermore, the analysis of the four parodic versions reveals ways in which widely shared and historically enduring racial stereotypes such as "dumb blonde" and "ching chong" are reproduced on YouTube.

For my conceptual framework, I mainly draw on semiotic anthropology (e.g., Silverstein, 1976, 1993; Urban, 1996; Wortham, 2003), and particularly on the model of "speaker role inhabitance" as proposed by Michèle Koven (2001, 2002, 2007). In addition, I draw on sociolinguistic studies of discourse (e.g., Blommaert, 2010; Coupland, 2007; van Dijk, 1992) and studies of digital discourse (e.g., Androutsopoulos, 2010; Thurlow and Mroczek, 2011).

In the sections that follow, I first discuss how we can approach digital discourse in Web 2.0 environments. Then I provide my conceptual framework in which I describe the speaker role inhabitance model. The analysis shows multiple ways of "appropriating the language of the Other" (Park and Wee, 2008). I suggest that the notion of CC be reconceptualized as "multiple competences", which are dialectically related to multiple or "polycentric" norms (Blommaert, 2010). Finally, I argue for a cognitively reconceptualized notion of CC, which highlights the presuppositions of discourse while regarding the agentive manipulation of the technological constraints and affordances of Web 2.0 environments as new sociocultural knowledge.

2. YouTube in Web 2.0 environments

My field site, located on YouTube, is unconventional and relatively new. Thus I describe the distinctiveness of this site while qualifying its radical newness. I then add one more dimension to CC in Web 2.0 environments, which concerns the knowledge of how to participate in the YouTube "community".

One of the distinctive characteristics of Web 2.0 is the participation of users. In other words, information can be shared by "tools for the management of user-generated content", which facilitates user participation (Androutsopoulos, 2010, p. 207). From this perspective, YouTube can be conceptualized as a site of performance because its videos are posted for an audience who consume them as a form of entertainment, and sometimes respond with comments and response videos (2010, p. 209). However, we should not overestimate the newness of Web 2.0., but be aware of the old inequalities of the new media in terms of "access, control and opportunity" (Thurlow and Mroczek, 2011, p. xxviii). Furthermore, the present architectural design of YouTube often makes it function "as a site of exoticization and voyeurism" (Chun and Walters, 2011, p. 255).

Bearing these cautions in mind, I still argue that YouTube videos provide new analytic opportunities from a unique perspective. Participating in Web 2.0 environments requires CC in such matters as limiting one's audience and controlling the level of participation that one invites from viewers, in addition to competence in producing and interpreting discourse. Knowing how to limit the audience may be seen as more than *communicative* competence. However, I extend the scope of CC and add a *technological* component to the notion of CC. I thus posit CC in Web 2.0 environments that relates to controlling the degree of participation. Specifically, the YouTube design allows its users to just view videos, or else comment on them, or even post response videos. When users actually post videos, they can "manipulate…different desired levels of informational and behavioral publicity and privacy" (Lange, 2008, p. 378), which can be thought of as "publicly private" and "privately public" behavior. The former refers to the restriction of access to the videos, namely the fact that only the video makers' friends have access to them. The latter means "making connections with many other people, while being relatively private with regard to sharing identity information" (2008, pp. 369–372).

Alexandra Wallace did not opt for a restrictive participatory framework, making her video "publicly public" instead. In contrast, two parody posters, Logan Sexy Back and The Angelie Vaudeville, did not fully disclose their identity. Thus their

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[3] Prejudiced monolingual English-speaking Anglos make no distinction among Asian languages (Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Vietnamese, Cambodian, etc.), but recognize only one language, "Asian", which they alternatively refer to generically as "Chinese". This is the effect of the semiotic process of "erasure" in which "ideology…renders some persons or activities…invisible" (Irvine and Gal, 2000, p. 38). My intent here is to raise critical awareness of the notion of "Asian", rather than marginalizing monolingual (white) speakers of English. Also see note 4.

[4] The extent to which the homogeneous entity "Asian" is widely shared among monolingual white speakers of English deserves empirically investigation. At least for Wallace, there is no distinction among "Asians", both linguistically and ethno-racially. In the original video, she complains about Asians "checking on everybody from the tsunami thing" on their cell phones in the library. By "the tsunami thing", she presumably refers to the devastating earthquake and tsunami in Japan on March 11, 2011. Thus, in her conceptualization, the families of all Asians in the library at UCLA are affected by "the tsunami thing" in Japan.