Language & Communication 39 (2014) 1–13

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Language & Communication

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

Voicing conflict: Moral evaluation and responsibility in a Sri Lankan Muslim family's conversations

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online 7 July 2014

Keywords:
Voice
Morality
Responsibility
Ethnicity
Conflict
Muslim

ABSTRACT

This article builds on literature on language and positionality to explore the role of voicing in the way individuals configure social differences. Drawing on research during the last phase of the Sri Lankan civil war, I examine how a Muslim family employs voicing to evaluate other individuals and ethnic groups in a way that pertains to morality and responsibility. I suggest that in an atmosphere of enshrouding fear, responsibility is not only an issue in terms of people's accountability for what they say and do but is also central in the way people situate themselves in relation to others.

1. Introduction

Scholars of language have long been interested in the role of voice in socially positioning speakers (e.g. Agha, 2007; Bakhtin, 1981, 1984, 1986; Jakobson, 1960; Irvine, 2001; Voloshinov, 1973). Voice, or the "linguistic construction of social personae" (Keane, 2001, p. 268), is a broader category than reported speech because it includes other rhetorical strategies, such as prosody and intonation (Hill, 1995; Rumsey, 2010). In his discussion of double voiced utterances, Bakhtin explains the twofold direction of voice: "It is directed both toward the referential object of speech, as in ordinary discourse, and toward another's discourse, toward someone else's speech" (1984, p. 92). The dual nature of voice provides speakers with a resource with which to evaluate others, which may have social or moral implications (Keane, 2001, 2010, 2011; Hill, 1995; Rumsey, 2010; Wortham and Locher, 1999). These evaluations do not only draw upon widely circulating associations between ways of speaking and social types of person, which are related to social categories, such as class, gender, race, and ethnicity, but can also reinforce or solidify them (Agha, 2007; Keane, 2010). Voice is also an intriguing interactional resource because making attributions of speaker responsibility for voiced utterances and the evaluations present within them is difficult by virtue of its embedding of speaker positionality (Hill and Irvine, 1992; Keane, 2001).

In situations of state violence, people are often careful about what they say in the presence of others because of fear of accountability for their words and actions (Devotta, 2009; Nordstrom, 1997; Suárez-Orozco, 1992). I conducted fieldwork in an ethnically diverse urban center (Kandy) in Sri Lanka during the final phase of the civil war between the Sri Lankan government and a Tamil insurgency group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE),[1] from June 2007–August 2008. During this heightened moment in the over 25-year conflict (1983–2009), ethnic divisions among Sinhalese, Tamils, and Muslims, as incorporated into state structures, infused everyday interactions. In conversations that I observed as a white American female, I found that while a person's ethnic identity was almost always made evident in the way they were talked about by others,

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[1] For an account of the causes of the Sri Lankan civil war see Spencer (1990), Tambiah (1986) and Thiranagama (2011).

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.langcom.2014.05.007
0271-5309/

people tended to avoid explicitly critiquing other individuals or ethnic groups. This behavior may have been a result of general interactional tendencies at the time, as well as my presence in the interactions. However, I found that it was quite common for speakers to employ metapragmatic resources in their talk, such as voicing, to subtly position themselves in relation to others. Because these positions were implicit, it was more difficult for interlocutors to pinpoint exactly what the speakers were saying, as well as to hold them directly accountable or responsible for their utterances.[2] In this article, I build on literature on language and positionality to explore how members of a Sri Lankan Muslim family employ voicing in interactions that occurred in the home, and evaluate themselves in relation to other individuals and ethnic groups via this voicing. I demonstrate how attention to voicing in multi-party talk highlights the role of morality and responsibility in the way individuals draw on their complex linguistic repertoires to configure themselves in relation to others.

2. Southern Muslims and the configuration of difference

Often excluded from mainstream representations of the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict, Muslims comprise the nation's second largest minority group (8.3 percent of the population). Approximately three-quarters of the population (74.5 percent) is Sinhalese (Buddhist and Christian). Tamils are the largest minority group (Hindu and Christian). They are historically differentiated into two groups: North and East Tamils (11.9 percent), who are considered to be the historically oldest group; and Up-country Tamils (4.6 percent), who came from South India during the British period (1815–1948) to work as laborers on the plantations in the South-Central highlands. Muslims have deep roots in Sri Lanka that can be traced back to Indo-Arab and Persian maritime commerce across the Indian Ocean over the past millennium (McGilvray and Raheem, 2007; Thiranagama, 2011).

In the 1930s, ethnicity—as based on language rather than race, religion, or locality—emerged as the primary mode of socio-cultural and political identification for Sinhalese and Tamils (Rogers, 1994; Spencer, 1990). Though the majority of Muslims speak Tamil as a first language, they define themselves as a separate ethnic group from Tamils based on their religion alone.[3] While Muslims first characterized themselves as a racially distinct group from Tamils in the struggle for separate political representation in the late 19th century, in the 20th century urban southern Muslims (then representing Sri Lankan Muslims as a whole) gradually constructed a pan-Islamic ethnic identity, which enabled them to stay aloof from the Sinhalese–Tamil conflict (Daniel, 1996; Thiranagama, 2011). As McGilvray and Raheem (2007, p. 13) explain, Muslims have an anomalous place in Sri Lankan ethno-politics because "they have defensively constructed an ethnic identity that is neither Sinhala nor Tamil, distinguishing themselves categorically from the island's two ethnic adversaries."

Socio-culturally, politically, and economically distinct from their counterparts in the war-ravaged North and East, southern Muslims live in scattered pockets throughout the Sinhalese majority South (the South). Rather than seeking their own political identity, southern Muslims aligned with the Sinhalese Buddhist majority government following independence, and therefore received economic and educational concessions. Though Muslims' ethnic and political identities eventually merged with the formation of the Sri Lankan Muslim Congress in 1981, most southern Muslims continue to support mainstream parties. Changes in economic policies in the 1970s, combined with their growing interest in education as a vehicle for success in business and government employment, contributed to the growth of a sizable southern Muslim middle class. Labor migration to the Gulf States and the influence of transnational Islamic organizations strengthened their Islamic identity (McGilvray, 2008; Nuhuman, 2007; O'Sullivan, 1999).

Despite some relative economic prosperity and political leverage during the civil war and currently, Muslims have been in a difficult position as a small and vulnerable minority group situated between powerful Sinhalese and Tamil nationalisms (Thiranagama, 2011). Southern Muslims are subject to discrimination from Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists, who do not see ethnic minorities (Muslims and Tamils) as belonging within the nation-state (Devotta, 2009; Imtiyaz and Hoole, 2011).[4] The relationship between Muslims and Tamil minority groups is no less conflicted. Throughout the last three decades, eastern Muslims have been victims of brutal violence on the part of the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government (see McGilvray, 2008). In 1990, the LTTE, desiring a racially pure Tamil state (*Eelam*), expelled tens of thousands of northern Muslims from Jaffna, many of whom still reside in refugee camps (see Thiranagama, 2011). Somewhat removed from the immediate plight of northern and eastern Muslims, southern Muslims face their own challenges due to having to live and work in close proximity to Sinhalese and/or Tamils (Imtiyaz and Hoole, 2011). Mainstream southern Muslim politics dictates that Muslims coexist amicably with other ethnic groups while maintaining their distinct ethno-religious and cultural identity. Heightened moments in the civil war only increased Muslims' feelings of uncertainty about their relationship with Sinhalese and Tamils.

From 2007 to 2009, the Sri Lankan government, seeking a military solution to the conflict, carried out a massive military campaign to take over the last LTTE-held regions in the northern "Vanni" region, at the cost of thousands of military and civilian lives. On May 16, 2009, the Sri Lankan army declared victory over the LTTE (Thiranagama, 2011).[5] During the last

[2] Silverstein (1981) discusses how certain semiotic properties of language use make utterances more or less available for speaker metapragmatic awareness.

[3] The fact that Muslim ethnicity is based on religion rather than language is incorporated into the national curriculum for government schools.

[4] Since the end of the war, there have been several incidents of hardline Buddhist monks attacking Muslim communities in Sri Lanka (France-Presse, 2013).

[5] A political solution to the conflict that meets the needs of Sri Lanka's ethnic minority groups has not been found. Therefore, the ethnic conflict persists even though the war may be over (Bass, 2012).