



Messages from my father-in-law: Indexing membership and proximity in long-distance voicemails



Jonna M. Yarrington

University of Arizona, P.O. Box 210030, Tucson, AZ 85721-0030, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online 11 July 2014

Keywords:
Anthropological linguistics
Discourse analysis
Semiotics

ABSTRACT

This is a linguistic anthropological analysis of 18 voicemails left by the author's father-in-law on her telephone over 11 months. Semiotic analysis shows that the speaker incorporates his communications into his daily personal and religious rituals, evidencing a mode of discursively constructing and performing kinship relations and eliciting responses in imagined, or perhaps just slowed, talk-in-interaction. The speaker brings membership licensing, religious fluency, and social proximity necessitated by the bond of marriage. He leaves, with his voicemails, the self-renewing possibility of the strongest of future kin relations, despite being separated by a physical distance of over 2300 miles.

© 2014 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

What is my father-in-law thinking when he leaves voice messages on my phone on Sunday mornings? What is he doing with those voice messages? More importantly, what does he think he is doing with those voice messages? This paper borrows from the work of Michael Silverstein on indexical order and the link between the “macro-sociological” and micro “talk-in-interaction” (2003). I use this frame of semiotic analysis to replay 18 voicemails left over a period of 11 months on my cell phone in Arizona and Virginia by my father-in-law who lives in southeastern Virginia and whom I will call Jim.¹

These messages, with durations ranging from 22 s to 1 min, 37 s, show that Jim incorporates his communications with me into his daily personal and religious rituals, which themselves do not cohere into distinctive or mutually exclusive categories. These communications are Jim's attempts to participate in and affect me and my husband's lives. Overlapping indices pervade the voicemails, showing that Jim is, perhaps in shorter increments than sociolinguists are used to, attempting to discursively construct and perform kinship relations and ritual practices, while also eliciting responses in a type of imagined—or perhaps just slowed—talk-in-interaction. These practices play out in a number of discursive devices visible in the transcripts, ultimately evidencing a tendency for Jim to elicit interaction and effectivity through relations sustained by his communicatory acts, which stretch to condense the 2300 miles that separate us.

Each voicemail follows a general pattern. There exist a number of discursive strategies and practices that voice a range of indices serving to connect the three of us (me, Landon, and Jim) to each other and to our relevant, shared kin network. Of the 18 messages, 17 were placed from Jim's home landline and one from the landline at his church; 10 were placed on Sunday mornings, and most occurred between the hours of 4 a.m. and 10 a.m. his time. Message 13 seems to be one of the most

E-mail address: jmknep@email.arizona.edu.

¹ I provide Jim a pseudonym to the extent I am able. I do not provide my husband, Landon, with a pseudonym. Since it is easily accessible knowledge that I am married to Landon, who is also in anthropology, it would be unfeasible for me to attempt to hide his identity.

representative, containing eight of the 13 discursive constructions I have combed out for analytic purposes (to be discussed further in Section 3).

Message 13²

Date: Sunday

His time: 7:44 a.m.

1 Good morning Jonna Yarrington. This is Jim Yarrington, Landon
2 Yarrington's dad. Just callin to: to be sure you- to remember to wish
3 **God** a happy birth- a happy father's day. And to call your dad too. But
4 anyway uh you guys get up and go to church on father's day. That'd be
5 a gift to me. I already talked to Landon's answerin machine. So uh
6 anyway watch the mailbox and uh see ya in church. I'm prayin that the
7 "hounds of heaven"- that's C.S. Lewis instead of he'd call it the Holy
8 Spirit he'd call it the "hounds of heaven". I'm calling for the hounds
9 of heaven to keep buggin yall til yall give in to church. Alright.
10 Call me. Buhbye.

Though Message 13 was left on Father's Day and all messages are not left only on marked days, it is still fair to characterize it as the most representative of all the messages for three reasons. First, it contains the introductory cluster ("Good morning Jonna Yarrington. This is Jim Yarrington, Landon Yarrington's dad") that is repeated, at least in part, in 17 of the 18 messages. This, after having known Jim for over five years, and after having been married to his son more than 10 months before this particular message was recorded. Second, Message 13 offers a glimpse of the religious language Jim wields in many of his voicemails, reinforced with quotations from pastoral messages, devotionals, or the Bible (in this case, it was C.S. Lewis). Third, Jim is heard in Message 13 using "yall" as a second person address, with latent ambiguity in number. This is a common occurrence in the voicemails, along with "you guys," a construct that I will argue covers the fusion of his two silent interlocutors, me and Landon. In this way, the meaning of marriage in terms of kinship relations translates into Jim's discursive and symbolic practices.³

Silverstein (2003) provides a position from which we may mine an ontological point that is transferrable to my analysis of my father-in-law's messages. He argues for the key role of ritualization in propping up indexicality. "Guarantor" may be the most appropriate word for what Silverstein theorizes is the role of ritual in connecting the macro (i.e., ideological) to the micro (i.e., practices in, or instantiations of, interaction). In fact, for Silverstein, authority stemming from ritualization is the fundamental value that "appears to achieve self-grounding" and licenses indices by a "recurrent *stipulative* or *baptismal essentialization*" (2003, 203).

In this paper, I argue that the three common characteristics of Jim's voicemails—commenting on our shared name, using religious language, and discursively marrying his interlocutors as co-addressees—evidence that the voicemails are multi-layered in indexical meaning, but ultimately grounded in Jim's ritualization of kin relations. First, I feel it is imperative for me to address the pragmatics of voicemail messages. Second, I present transcript data to illustrate Jim's ritual sealing and resealing of our kin connection through emphasis on our shared name, religiously inclusive discursive strategies, and use of *yall*, *you guys*, and other modes of turning an addressee into a heterogeneous singular. Finally, I turn to Silverstein's (2003) ontological point about indexical order to draw a broader conclusion about what my father-in-law is doing—or what we are doing together—when he leaves voicemails on my telephone.

2. The pragmatics of a voicemail

To analyze the 18 voicemails, it is necessary first to address the pragmatics of the voicemail message as a medium for communication and interaction. Some literature exists addressing voicemails linguistically and sociologically. Most recently, Mishler (2008) writes about the structure of voicemails, detailing what he argues is a recurring format of open-body-close. He notes the increasing use of voicemails for cell phone users, though the strict correlation he suggests previously existed between voicemails and service interactions is not immediately clear. "Voicemail [on cell phones] no longer serves just as a medium for service transactions; it is an important social channel through which relationships are maintained" (Mishler, 2008, 168). Hobbs (2003) looks at voicemail as a medium through which strategies of politeness are enacted; for her analysis, Hobbs draws data from voicemails left at a law firm.

² Transcript Conventions: (.) = pause; . = lower pitch; ^ = higher pitch; dash within a word ("talk-ing") = emphasized syllables; **bold** = emphasis; repeated consonant ("annd") = lengthened consonant; colon within a word ("a:nd") = lengthened vowel; ! = punctuated but not lower or higher pitch; underline = articulated separate words; ~ = creaking; comment in brackets ("[swallow]") = transcriber comment; ellipsis in brackets ("[...]") = transcriber has excerpted a section.

³ It is outside the scope of this paper to delve into detail on the historical or present characteristics of my relationship with Jim which constitute "kinship." Thus, in the interest of focusing on a linguistic anthropological analysis, I avoid detailing much about anthropological kinship (see Peletz, 1995).

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/934944>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/934944>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)