



Media authenticity and authority in Mauritius: On the mediality of language in religion

Patrick Eisenlohr

Utrecht University, Department of Cultural Anthropology, Heidelberglaan 2, PO Box 80140, 3508 TC Utrecht, The Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

In this article I suggest that the rapidly growing interest in the intersection of linguistic anthropology and media needs to be accompanied by a deeper investigation of the mediality of language. Discussing Mauritian Muslims' uses of sound reproduction in religious events revolving around the recitation of devotional poetry, this paper explores how language as a medium converges and interacts with media technologies of other kinds. I suggest that the oscillation between a foregrounding of the medium and its phenomenological withdrawal characterizes the functioning of both linguistic mediation and other media technologies and provides a comparative dimension to examine their interplay.

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1. Introduction

The intersection of linguistic and media practices has become an increasingly important topic in linguistic anthropology, such as in the analysis of transformation of publics through uses of new media technology (Barker, 2008; Spitulnik, 1996), the regimentation of time and space in mass-mediated discourse (Agha, 2007), the spread of new forms of enregisterment of personality through television (Goebel, 2008), or the migration of strategies of voice representation from oral discourse to written online interaction (Jones and Schieffelin, 2009). These studies show that linguistic anthropological theories and methods are uniquely suited to an analysis of contemporary media practices, especially in investigating how precisely new media enable new forms of interaction and social and political organization, and how they otherwise become integrated into existing traditions and established contexts of interaction with their cultural contexts and ideological shapes. Nevertheless, linguistic anthropological work on media has stopped short of exploring what may perhaps be the strongest contribution linguistic anthropologists could make to anthropological engagements with contemporary media. In my view this is the systematic comparison of language as a medium of sociocultural processes with the ways various contemporary media technologies are recognized to similarly mediate and shape such processes. This question is important because for anthropologists media wield enormous power. In this paper I suggest that the rapidly growing interest in the intersection of linguistic anthropology and media needs to be accompanied by a deeper investigation of the mediality of language, and how this medial quality of language converges and interacts with media technologies of other kinds, such as contemporary audiovisual media and the internet.

2. Mediation and media technology

For quite a while it has become commonplace for anthropologists to assert that uses of media technologies such as print, audiovisual technologies, sound reproduction, or the internet do not just convey and channel socially and culturally situated action, but in fact crucially shape and even produce, or at least co-produce sociocultural formations and processes. Whether

E-mail address: p.eisenlohr@uu.nl

the topic is nationalism, the public sphere, globalization, the so-called “turn to religion,” or transnational connections of various kinds, anthropologists have highlighted the productive role of media practices in the emergence of these processes. Anthropologists have certainly rejected the tendencies towards technodeterminism that can be found in the work of some prominent exponents of media studies (Kittler, 1997; Virilio, 1998), but seem otherwise firmly wedded to positions of media constructionism and media generativism. There is however, a difficulty with this position. How can the commonly observed role of media as cultural and political creators be reconciled with the also frequently attested phenomenological disappearance of the medium when it is working properly? Whether it is being immersed in a book, making a phone call, watching a movie or surfing the internet, for its habitual users, the same media technologies that seem to co-produce, shape and create such forms of interaction also recede into the background to the point of vanishing almost entirely from the perspective of its users. How can the disappearing and thus seemingly transparent medium also at the same time be the powerful creator of socio-cultural worlds?

If one abandons the simple transmitter model of media, there is perhaps one key characteristic that unites the manifold objects and technologies that have been designated “media.” This is their oscillation between highly obvious, visible and creative roles on one hand, and their tendency to vanish in the act of mediation on the other hand. This observation can be traced back to Aristotle’s discussion of *media diaphana*, or transparent media which enable processes of perception by inhabiting the space between observer and object (Hoffmann, 2002, pp. 30–35). In the example of air, this medium ever only becomes a focus of attention if it does not operate normally, and disturbs vision or disables hearing. In fact, contemporary media theorists treat this double aspect of media as a fundamental of media technologies, as they swing back and forth between the modes of high visibility and salience Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin term “hypermediacy,” and “immediacy” or self-erasure (Bolter and Grusin, 1999). Analyzing the relations between these two poles in, for example, contemporary digital technologies, Bolter and Grusin point out that “our two contradictory logics not only coexist in digital media today but are mutually dependent. Immediacy depends on hypermediacy” (Bolter and Grusin, 1999, p. 6). While media studies takes much of its intellectual energy from the insight that media have a profoundly shaping impact on human relations, summed up in the dictum that the “medium is the message” (McLuhan, 1964), newer forms of media also enable a “time–space compression” (Harvey, 1989, see also Tomlinson, 1999) to such a degree that the presence of the other in interactions is rendered so “real” that the medium seems to vanish into the background. As recent anthropological work on media has stressed, such denials of mediation enabled by seemingly “vanishing mediators” (Sterne, 2003) may even emerge as important sources of political power and legitimacy in a “politics of immediation” (Mazzarella, 2006; Allen, 2009; Eisenlohr, 2009). On the other hand, there is also a tendency in the writings of media theorists to portray media as ever more autonomous and visible apparatuses that are increasingly decoupled from human agency, a development greeted as salutary by some (Kittler, 1997), or described in apocalyptic terms by others (Baudrillard, 1994; Virilio, 1998).

Recent anthropological work on media and religion in particular has provided evidence for this tension between the highly productive and visible characteristics of newer media technologies and their relative disappearance in the act of mediation. In the contemporary world, there are a wide range of religious practitioners that employ ever more complex media technologies in a bid to gain more direct and “immediate” access to spiritual worlds, God, or other supernatural authorities. For example uses of new audiovisual or sound reproduction technologies by Pentecostal-charismatic Christians in Ghana (Meyer, 2006a,b), or Hindus in India (Rajagopal, 2001; Pinney, 2002), or Muslims in Egypt (Hirschkind, 2006) are geared towards establishing relationships with religious otherworlds that center on an esthetics of what another anthropologist of religion has called the “live and direct” (Engelke, 2007). According to this line of research, such seemingly more “direct” interactions with the supernatural also often privilege the affective and sensual dimensions of religious experience, with the goal of arriving at some state of embodied immediacy with the divine. That is, such religious media practices often aim at making the mediating apparatus vanish as the enabling “in-between” in these religious interactions with an otherworld, however conceived. At the same time, this body of research stresses that such new media practices have produced also new religious subjectivities, and have also created new public spheres or have transformed existing ones with great political effect (see especially Rajagopal, 2001; Hirschkind, 2006; Meyer, 2004). Nevertheless, the obvious mediatic qualities of language in religion have hardly played a role in these approaches that treat media as intrinsic to religion, despite a sizeable body of work on language and religion in linguistic anthropology and related fields in other disciplines (Keane, 2004).

3. Language and mediation

How do such double characterizations of media technology relate to the particular medium linguistic anthropologists study, that is language as a medium of socio-cultural worlds? Is the characterization of whatever can function as a medium as oscillating between highly visible, creative power and phenomenological disappearance also of relevance for language as a medium? For students of language this double characterization certainly has a familiar ring. In fact, the opposition between mediatic salience and disappearance was prefigured in 19th and early 20th century debates about language as a medium that finally lead to the Saussurian formulation of the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign (Saussure, 1983). The latter was seen as the point where language becomes a seemingly transparent medium of sense, not because of any presumed glass-like qualities, but because the linguistic sound was considered to be the most “immaterial” of all media, in the sense that its intrinsic qualities and own materiality leave the least imprint on the thoughts and meanings it conveys. In the Western philosophical tradition, one of the main sources of this characterization of the linguistic sound as self-negative and

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