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The importance of unimportant language

Jan Blommaert
Tilburg University and Ghent University

Piia Varis
Tilburg University

BANALITY AS MEANINGFUL

In a recent paper, the Australian historian, Martyn Lyons (2013), reviews his attempts to study 'history from below', using what can be called grassroots writing by French and Italian soldiers of the Great War. Lyons remarks that the 'First World War produced a flood of letter-writing by peasants whose literary capacity has often been underestimated' (Lyons 2013: 5). In France, no less than 10,000 million postal items were dispatched during the war, huge numbers of those being letters and cards written by soldiers from the frontlines to their loved ones. Lyons comments further:

> Soldiers' letters followed standard ritualistic formulas, giving and asking for news about health, discussing letters and postcards sent and received, sending greetings to many relatives and neighbors. As a result, their writing leaves us with an overwhelming sense of banality. (Lyons 2013: 22)

Contentwise, thus, the millions of letters sent to and from the front seemed to have little to offer: frontline soldiers 'wrote, and expected to receive, comforting repetitions of laconic formulas, which conveyed very little of their experience' (id.: 23). This remark by Lyons is followed by a fragment from a letter to the front, which should serve as an argument underpinning the claim about contentless communication:

> Rosa Roumiguières invited her correspondent to dispense with words altogether. 'I'd be happy with a single line, a single word', she wrote in August 1914, 'even with just an envelope with nothing inside, but write to me often' (…) (ibid.)

Rosa's invective to her frontline soldier, we would say, points to something which is rather far removed from the 'banality' discerned by Lyons as the reason why the mountain of frontline correspondence reveals so little of the soldiers' (and their correspondents') experience. On the contrary: Rosa clearly points towards the tremendous importance of communication *even when such communication has little to offer in the way of content*. The banality of the letters did not prevent their authors and addressees from attaching extraordinary

importance to them—the sheer fact of writing, or better, of *sending something*, was enough to comfort and reassure people worried to the extreme about each other's wellbeing. The simple act of communication itself was tremendously meaningful: it was the 'sign of life' that was so crucial in the social world surrounding the Great War; it forced people who otherwise were not great writers to compose tons of letters and postcards—in itself a pretty powerful revelation of the soldiers' and their correspondents' experience.

This special issue will engage with the paradox we have encountered here: that people often produce 'unimportant' language, when seen from the viewpoint of denotational and informational content, but still attach tremendous importance to such unimportant forms of communication. They invest tremendous amounts of energy in them (Lyons mentions a French soldier who wrote an average of three to four letters per day at the frontline, p. 22) and their efforts at communicating were often effective. At least, they were effective for the likes of Rosa Roumiguières; for historians many decades later, however, they often fail to live up to the promise of denotational and informational richness—they are 'banal' historical artifacts.

THE ISSUE

Erving Goffman, that great observer of the ordinary, spent a large part of his *Behavior in Public Places* on describing the rules of superficial engagement between people—the hardly profound kinds of social relationships he called 'acquaintanceship'. In Goffman's words:

> Common sense designates by the phrase 'mere acquaintance' a relationship in which the rights of social recognition form the principal substance of the relationship. Further, after persons have been 'close' it is possible for their relationship to decay, stopping only at a point where they are 'still on talking terms', or, after that (and with a discontinuous leap), at a point when they are 'not talking', in either case conferring on mere engagement practices the power of characterizing the relationship. (Goffman 1963: 114).

Particular 'engagement practices'—let's call them patterns of social interaction—define, in the minds of people, entire elaborate typologies of social relationships, a gradient from being 'close', to being 'on speaking terms' to 'not talking' anymore, with 'acquaintanceship' taking a position somewhere midway between deep human engagement (friendship) and no such engagement at all.

The patterns of social interaction in which 'mere acquaintances' engage are quite superficial: Goffman (1963: 154) describes a universe of nods, body movements, eye contact, greetings, and what he calls 'safe supplies', maximally shared topics of restricted importance that can keep polite conversation going for quite a while without any degree of (or necessity for) movement towards more intimate subjects. (Think of the weather, sports results, popular TV shows or current scandals as examples of such topics.) Yet Goffman insists on their extraordinary importance in US bourgeois culture: failing to sustain such low-intensity interactions or refusing such forms of engagement is seen as a very serious violation of the rules of civility, and he draws on the support of several authors of well-read etiquette books and prominent society columnists for evidence. *Behavior in Public Places* demonstrates, along with other things,

how many of our vital social relationships are built on seemingly unimportant interactions, how 'small talk' and restricted displays of information, knowledge and wit secure the persistence of big social structures, membership of which we find extraordinarily important.

The papers in this volume follow this line of argument, namely, the vital importance of patterns of interaction often seen as unimportant. Each paper seeks to focus disciplined attention on forms of discourse that occur in minimal quantity and degree of elaboration, that nevertheless carry momentous social salience in several domains of social life. The orientation of the work reported here is *functional*: we address language from the perspective of its effects – 'meaning' of course, but typically a broad range of meanings covered by terms such as 'social effect'. While the often emblematic or 'phatic' functions of such patterns of interaction do not necessarily project much in the way of denotational content, they provide rich and ordered indexicals and are, in that sense, a key form of *socio*-linguistic life: forms of language usage that, in themselves and because of intricate pragmatic-metapragmatic links to be described in the papers, create, sustain and amend social structures. The tremendous efforts often invested in acquiring such 'phatic' skills, documented in Fie Velghe's paper in this volume, illustrate the social significance of such practices. This is micro-sociolinguistic stuff directly connecting with macro-social stuff. For the authors in this collection, this is exactly the analytical importance of unimportant language.

Let us make the latter point very clear: it is important to keep in mind that our focus is on the ways in which 'minimal' forms of language usage relate to large-scale social structures and developments therein. And while a significant portion of what is discussed in the papers will be devoted to the particular linguistic-discursive forms themselves, the end point of such description contributes to insights in the nature of contemporary social organization. This specific sociolinguistic orientation sets this collection apart from the well-known tradition of work on 'small talk' initiated by Justine Coupland and associates (e.g. Coupland 2000). In this earlier work, much of it truly brilliant, the focus was on the interactional importance of 'small talk'. While very often dismissed as mere introductory and concluding ('unimportant') aspects of talk-in-interaction, Coupland and her associates demonstrated how small talk contributed to sustained interactional engagement and, through that, to face, identity and relational concerns among speakers (e.g. Jaworski 2000). The recognition of small talk as a legitimate and relevant object of discourse analysis is due to this work; we can build on this discourse-analytic salience in our sociolinguistic approach to similar phenomena. Taking their discursive salience as a point of departure, we can look at these phenomena from the perspective of how they create a vernacularized and everyday experienced reality of 'big' social diacritics and dynamics.

A number of points regarding the specific orientation of papers in this collection demand further explanation. While we discuss these points, we will also have the opportunity to locate the specific contributions in this collection within the framework thus sketched.

THE ONLINE 'PHATIC' WORLD

First, this collection grew out of a growing awareness of the immense frequency

of 'phatic' features observable in social media interaction (cf. Miller 2008; Lange 2009; Thurlow and Jaworski 2011). The Facebook 'like' button is probably among the world's most frequently used signs, with several billions of instances of use every day, yet it is a typical 'phatic' sign, a gesture, the precise semantic direction of which is highly variable. One can 'like' both a relative's birthday announcement and a very unpleasant piece of news, and the 'like' sign can thus effectively mean 'dislike' as well—it can be pragmatically deployed to signal the opposite of its conventional semantic content. That other Facebook function, identifying and requesting 'friends', is equally something that in effect covers a very broad and diverse range of experiential subdivisions, casting an uncomfortable light on established notions such as 'community' informed by Durkheimian-Parsonian imaginations of homogeneity and sharedness of membership status and features. Other current phenomena of online communication, such as 'sharing' and 'retweeting' signs and messages, also appear to operate on a pragmatic-metapragmatic level rather than on a semantic one, signaling co-presence, as well as attention and affection rather than (dis)agreement with sign contents.

The emergence and wide distribution of online and mobile technologies has shaped new lifeworlds for large numbers of people, now effectively integrated, so to speak, with 'offline' social life and constructing along with other forms of sociocultural diversification the 'superdiversity' characterizing our present social systems (e.g. Varis and Wang 2011; Blommaert and Rampton 2011). New social units have emerged—think of social media and online gaming 'communities' – entailing new opportunities for identity enactment and performance and driven by new forms of online visual-literate genres and registers (see Varis 2014 for a survey). It is important to understand that such new social environments constitute novel and unprecedented socio-technologically mediated *sociolinguistic* environments ('contexts' in traditional jargon). This new online sociolinguistic environment has reshuffled the *entire* economy of semiotic and linguistic resources in social formations – a feature which includes not just those who have abundant access to the new technologies but also those who lack such (degrees of) access.

While much of the sociolinguistic features and impact of these innovations remains to be explored, authors in this collection will suggest that part of that newness may reside, precisely, in the abundance of 'phatic' patterns of interaction, combined with a mysterious sociolinguistic and discursive phenomenon commonly known as 'virality': the extraordinary speed and scale with which certain signs—often phatic—are spread on the internet. Virality is a communication phenomenon in which sometimes millions of people 'share' a sign, for reasons not located in the sign itself—'memes' do not mean the same thing for the people who send them around (see Varis and Blommaert in this volume). The astonishing virality of things such as *Gangnam Style* (initially a music video published on YouTube by the South-Korean entertainer Psy) reaching two *billion* views by June 2014 raises complex issues of communication, meaning and community structure for researchers; all the more interesting since there appears to be a very broad consensus over the fact that Gangnam Style is neither a musical, visual or entertainment revolution in terms of quality.

The point is that the new online world offers numerous invitations for unthinking and rethinking semiotic

truths for researchers, and that these opportunities quickly extend to social and cultural theory: the challenges are fundamental and general, not specific and case-restricted and authors in this collection address them.

CONVIVIALITY

The recognition of the tremendous frequency of 'phatic' phenomena online goes hand in hand with a renewed attention for the broader and equally challenging phenomena that go under the label of 'conviviality' (e.g. Wessendorf 2010). Conviviality stands for low-intensity social engagement, seemingly superficial but critical for, in fact, importantly assuring social cohesion, community belonging and social comfort. We can see Goffman's work discussed above as a study of conviviality in US bourgeois culture in many ways. Current research on superdiverse sociocultural environments, however, establishes the relevance of conviviality as a relatively unexpected but very important social structure in contexts of profound sociocultural fragmentation (cf. Blommaert 2013). The delicate display of minimal and 'truncated' multilingual language proficiency and discursive moves captured under Goffman's 'safe supplies' actually proves to play a crucial role in sustaining a nonthreatening and homely community feeling among people who otherwise do not seem to share much. It functions as an emblematic pointer to the need and desire to get along in conditions where more profound engagement may be unwarranted, not necessary or impossible (see the papers by Goebel and Heil, in this volume).

Like the density of 'phatic' phenomena on social media platforms, everyday forms of convivial interaction appear to lead us to views of social structures that ensure and generate community membership in contexts where sharedness of characteristics, backgrounds and resources is not to be taken for granted. Such insights may be of general relevance for our understanding of contemporary social and cultural dynamics propelled not by 'thick' and dense social bonds but by 'light' and flexible ones.

ON STRUCTURE

The term 'social structure' has been used repeatedly so far. But what exactly do we mean by the term 'structure'? Usually, we refer to a form of stability, a recurrent characteristic that does not define single cases, but sets and categories of cases. A structure is a generalization—regularities across cases are defined by it – and a projection of an image of a chunk of reality, as the stable, static and timeless characteristics of a system that otherwise can be highly changeable. This is the 'structure' of classical structuralism.

In actual fact, and empirically, that to which we assign the label of 'structure' is often a feature that is subject to *slow change*. Empirically, we see a structure when we encounter enduring features, features that change at a very low pace—structure, then, is the *durée* in a system. Slow change, of course, is change nonetheless and a structure can therefore never be a *stable* feature, a feature that *does not change*. It is a feature that changes at a slower pace than others. And—this is crucial—a structure operates along all sorts of features that have a shorter lifespan and a higher pace of change and development, it is part of a complex interplay of different layers of history operating at different speeds upon the same social situation. So if we look for structures, we cannot do that *against* or *in contrast to* fast-changing

aspects of the system. The stochastic character of the system compels us to see structures in interaction with other features and to keep in mind that all sorts of non-structural, exceptional and deviant features can cause massive changes in the system – can recreate structures so to say (cf. Blommaert 2013: 115).

The social structures we address in the papers in this collection are, we believe, *emergent* structures characterizing an evolving social order, the stability of which is permanently under pressure because of the diversity of people and activities that co-construct it—'human association as a flowing process' in Herbert Blumer's (1969: 110) famous words. Looking at the lowest everyday level at which such co-construction proceeds is a tactic employed by Goffman, Blumer, Cicourel and other scholars of an earlier generation, who were dissatisfied with structuralist a priori assumptions about order and stability in social systems, and who assumed that every degree of social order rests on the continuous iterative and made-meaningful enactment of characteristics of such order in everyday behavior. We share that assumption as well as its methodological consequence: that micro-research is at once macro-research, in which a precise understanding of the macro-structures of social life can, and often does, reside in at first inspection insignificant details of people's social behavior—such as 'unimportant language' usage.

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