

Assignment 2: Cultural Identity

Part 1: language, dialects and email

Assignment:

Some questions to think about: What do we need to know about the other person in order to converse with them? What are the things we learn about another person through their use of language? How does this migrate to the online world - given the sparse identity cues, what aspects of conversation become especially problematic? Given that in conversational forums (such as email lists, etc) all we know of a person is through their words, what are the identity cues we can discern via language? How is language evolving online?

Observe two conversations, one in the immediate world and one online (can be email, chat, newsgroup, bulletin board etc., but should be something that is conversational - people interacting with each other - rather than more publication-like media). Watch for:

- ways in which the participants reveal their identity through their language (including non-textual/non-verbal aspects)
- ways they use their knowledge of each other's identity to modify their language
- ways they try to assess the other's identity

Write up your observations. Keep the Saviile-Troike reading in mind as you frame your description - are you finding interesting phenomena in greetings? in contextually motivated language or stylistic shifts? etc.

Response:

Conversation 1: Direct personal physical reality (with biased commentary)

3 male participants in their late twenties in an environment where other people come in and out. Carl & Scott live together; Scott & Alex are best friends and have known one another since high school. Carl is a gay and Mexican; all of his friends are straight and white.

Initially, Carl & Scott are sitting in Scott's room, listening to music and shooting

the shit. Alex enters the room and Carl turns to him and greets him through sexual remarks, along the lines of "Hey baby, come sit in my lap." He is explicitly flamboyant, appearing to present a mocking view of his gay sexuality. Alex rolls his eyes, indicating that this greeting is pretty normal,

and responds with "Hey Carl - good to see you too." Carl pretends to get offended and throws back "What? You don't like this hot Mexican ass?" Alex raises an eyebrow and then turns his head to Scott. Scott just nods his head at Alex in greeting and Alex proceeds to sit down next to Scott. Carl gets up in a fake huff and starts to talk around the room, picking up CDs and other collections that Scott owns.

After a short silence, Scott turns to Alex and asks "So, what's going on?" to which Alex responds with "nothing". Short silence, which Carl breaks with "Bullshit Alex, your life is full of drama" to which Alex scowls.

As the night continues, the boys continue to taunt one another with little things. Carl continues to make direct references to his Mexican heritage, at one point mocking another person in the room for being his brother because they share the same dark Mexican eyes. Carl's language functions are sarcasm, often bringing his Mexican gay identity into the picture, reacting to the fact that that makes him unique in this situation. Alex primarily functions on sharing what is necessary or what is pulled out of him. Scott asks simple questions for social appropriateness, knowing that the language responses will give him no feedback. Having spoken with Alex & Scott, they don't expect any linguistic honesty from the other two, but use the responses to get a gauge on what emotional content lies beneath.

Unlike their interactions with me personally, their interactions in a group are heavily distanced, with minimal sharing of verbal personal information. Their shared experience is encoded in their body language, what they offer one another, how they respond to music and shared objects. The content of the conversation becomes meaningless, as they are all looking to see more detailed responses. Carl is the only one who adds verbal character to it, and it's all based on a certain level of sarcasm. Scott will tell little lies to add humor to the situation, knowing that the other boys recognize all of his content as lies (I've been able to gain this awareness by conversing with them privately).

Having baseline knowledge about them and their interactions makes the observation fascinating. They expect to share everything through body language and gestures, not verbal cues; verbal cues are meant to tease one another. Their identity comes out in how they gesture to one another, what they put forward in their body language. Carl magnifies his gayness through intentional prancing. Alex & Scott try to keep a low profile, constantly observing others who enter into the room, with particular attention to the non-passive Carl. Much about Carl's perception of Alex & Scott comes out through the ways in which Carl taunts them, and particularly how they respond to Carl.

When outsiders enter the room, Carl becomes less sarcastic, adjusting his behavior to acknowledge that others are not aware of their relationship and

might not take the sarcasm as well. Alex & Scott are less self-monitoring, continuing to stay in the background.

Conversation 2: Digital discussion by participants in same physical environment

This conversation is taking place on a public archived mailing list with a 128 members. During the conversation, about 10 people have spoken up. Although the mailing list was designed to help members of the same music scene communicate with one another, the group often talks about other things of common interest. It's important to note that most members of this community see each other regularly in social contexts at various music events around Boston. The conversation was sparked by an initial post about the ACLU's request for people to sign a petition opposing IDs for voting.

Mike, the initial respondent, was outraged that someone from the group forwarded ACLU's post and commented on individual sections of the ACLU's post, suggesting that most of the information is a lie, inaccurate or an "attempt by leftists to vote multiple times." In his post, he made references to ways in which the legal system was set up for checks and balances and that there was no racism within the government.

Needless to say, this stirred up a lot of people's emotions and they sought to attack his responses, using personal/societal examples and legal cases. Mike responded to every response directed at him, although no one backed any of his statements, only tried to refute them.

About 10 messages into the conversation, another poster started attacking Mike's views, referencing older events and angrily stating that his Libertarian attacks on people are not appreciated in this forum. He furthered this by attacking all Libertarians. Others tried to post with "can't we all get along?" type messages but the flames slowly dwindled when people realized that the fighting wasn't getting anywhere.

Not only did this dialogue make it apparent that the community is quite leftist/liberal, but that the one non-liberal is quite vocal and vengeful, attacking individuals, which inevitably means that he's attacked right back. The tone of messages allows us to get glimpse of the people; their sex is often determined by the name on the post. Their political views are either derived by their content, or by statements like "As a Libertarian..." One can assume that everyone is white, because people of color seem to say "As a black woman..." as well. This makes it very interesting to see how social

norms are maintained and people have to state their difference to the group norms that are inexplicably built.

Thinking about both sets of conversations...

One of the fascinating things about the physical conversation that I chose is how much was discussed without words, and how words were not used to actually share information, but to share non-information that unintentionally shares information. In the digital realm, everything is about the "verbal" cues. Little bits can be picked up between the lines (email addresses), but for the most part, building a person's character relies on reading & understanding their words, or the words of others talking about them. Because there's only one set of signals, things can easily be misinterpreted. Additionally, because of the ease of flaming, things quickly reach a yelling match level, something that does not happen so easily in the physical world. Self-monitoring habits are altered because there's only one channel with which to monitor from, so you are either silent or vocal and have to worry intensely about being read right. Additionally, you can't see how others are responding to you, unless they do so explicitly. Thus, the ability to look around the room and see if most people agree becomes particularly challenging.