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COPING WITH THE LANGUAGE OF MADNESS IN RURAL BANGLADESH: AESTHETICS AND LANGUAGE IDEOLOGIES

James M. Wilce, Jr.

0. SESSION Introduction

How are we to bridge the fruitful but divergent traditions of work in phenomenology, embodiment, and ideologies of language? Linguistic ideologies are more than rational strategies of metadiscursive regimentation. They are also metapragmatic **sensibilities.** So, how can we present integrated accounts of the aesthetic, sensate, and embodied criteria— as well as the rational, cognitive, or political— that often inform responses to speakers as social actors?

JMW PAPER

This paper addresses two closely-linked but neglected dimensions at work in the linguistic ideologies invoked in the transcript on your handout: embodiment and aesthetics. I cal for a Bourdieuvian, habitus-oriented take on ideologies of language. To paraphrase Comaroff, “Ideologiy is most effective when it remais interred in embodied habit.” Bangladeshi bodies—both in speaking and in shaping interlocutor’s moves by responding to speaking—become not only objects but, in the case of Olna’s mother (described below) agents of metapragmatic regimentation. I won’t be addressing debates over schizophrenia as a biological condition, or its putative determining effects on language. Instead, I treat

Olna's "language of madness" as a screen onto which her family projects their typifications of language—and, first, as a playful challenge to those typifications.

The transcript on your handout represents an interaction taking place in March 1992 between several people, mostly members of Olna's family: my field assistant Shapla, who is holding the mike, her sister Olna (diagnosed as "schizophrenic" by a psychiatrist from the capital city, and their mother, Mashima. **SHOW VIDEO**

1.1 ON YOUR HANDOUT

If the transcript, especially line 11, gives you a sense of pressure upon Olna, it is because the family's economic and social well-being is at stake in not only what Olna says but in her restoration to competence in verbal performance.

When I heard from Shapla that her sister was deeply disturbed, often unable to sleep, I went to their home for the first time to hear from Olna herself about her sleep disturbance. Three months later the Dhaka psychiatrist put her on an antipsychotic medication that enabled her to answer some questions coherently. But when I was first getting to know her, Olna's responses were oblique, so indirect as to provoke multiple repair initiatives by her family.

That obliqueness upset Olna's mother and sister, but <u>why</u>? What does Olna's family want her to do? What are the ideals and typifications of speech that inform their metapragmatic moves? Evidently, they want her to attune to and engage the other, to complete adjacency pairs, to co-produce meaningful sequences. But let us consider how Shapla herself boils all of that down. What they ask Olna to do is *bal, sundar kare bal*—'speak, speak doing beauty,' 'speak beautifully, speak well.'

Shapla, in line 9, is quite particular about the kind of beauty she has in mind. She challenges Olna, “Can’t you speak like you are reciting a text?”-- or giving a speech-- which is probably a call for a loud, ringing larity and stylized intonational contour like children reciting school lessons, or someone reciting a poem or a surah of the Qur’an over a loudspeaker.

The family’s response to Olna’s speech reflects an aesthetic of language widely shared in Bangladesh, I surmise from comparing that event with several recorded hours of domestic conversations involving Suleyman— an old Muslim gentleman with symptoms like bipolar disorder. His family and neighbors tried more than once to stop him from speaking in a manner they considered selfishly private and unconventional. They openly encouraged his desire to spend a lot of his time reading— or, more accurately, reciting— sacred Islamic texts. So it appears that, at least throughout that part of Bangladesh, reciting is both a aesthetic ideal and a therapeutic prescription.

Olna’s mother (Mashima) and sister’s pulled and pushed her to speak clearly and referentially, and not only they but even a neighbor boy tried (in lines 17 and 18) to interpret Olna’s words as a proper speech act (a request for something), an act with situationally-appropriate sense and reference. If she wanted someone to give something, it must have some value, *mullo*, *da\m*.). But it seems misleading to see our moves (as opposed to Olna’s) in that conversation as uncovering something independently present in Olna’s speeh—meaning, intentionality, or a will to engage others. Rather, we were trying desparately to **pull her into** those spheres of meaning-making.

For the most part, however, Olna stsayed in her own semiotic world. She seemed to be reveling in speech itself— as a device not for signification or gain but for pleasure.

In lines 12-13 and 15-16, Olna plays with a paradigm of many possible derivations and inflections of the verb "to give" *dik e, dik a dā, ay dis eṭā, dik a rā di, dite balle*, outdoing even us structuralists in taking pleasure in structure for its own sake. In short order, she produced three optatives, a very intimate or demeaning imperative, an infinitive, and—what is most unusual—the naked root of the verb "to give." The extent to which syntax is completely absent in these iterations of the verb; the lilting intonational contours of these not-quite-utterances; and the relaxed, light vocal quality combine with the smile on Olna's face to give the impression of playful joy. Compare this with what Kristeva has written (on your handout) about psychotic speech in relation to *jouissance* or "orgasmic pleasure": that psychotic is not <u>about</u> meaning or signification but about something more like poetic artfulness or play.

Olna's flight-of-fancy contrasts with her family's aesthetic of nailed-down referential clarity. Even her "paradigm play" (not paradigms but syntagms lost) exemplifies sheer pleasure apart from rational-purposive illocutionary force. In contrast, her family tries to coax her to work harder to establish intersubjectivity, to attune, to conform to the normative Hindu practices of sociocentricity and relationality.

I'm moving to 1.2 on your handout

Building on deCerteau's metaphors of power as stability, I see Olna's sister occupying such a place from which she can exercise leverage on her ever-shifting sister. In that way, Shapla's metadiscursive speech is a classic case of an ideology— a stance informed by, and tending to reproduce, power. And her family invites comparison with the linguistic sensibilities of the staff of a Boston shelter for the homeless mentally ill as Bob Desjarlais describes it. Shelter residents play what they call "ragtime"

with language, but the staff seeks to impose transparent referentiality and incite the desire for intersubjectivity. There is a fundamental homology here. Desjarlais locates the larger significance of the shelter staff's metadiscourse in its relation to the state and **its** interest in the economic productivity of its citizens. The precarious economic position of Olna's family demands that they show a similar interest in returning Olna to economic productivity, which to them is apparently homologous with cooperative, mimetic, conventionalized linguistic productivity.

Still, Olna's family's behavior toward her is gentler than the Boston shelter staff's style of working with residents. More remarkably, it also seems to be sustained by an enduring hope that would be exceptional in relation to a schizophrenic person in the U.S. How was that possible, when Olna's mother (Mashima) had exhausted all the treatment options she had at hand?

In line 28 we see Mashima constructing the situation as remediable and thus sustaining hope and gentleness partly by a form of scaffolding in which she hides Olna's incompetence. Mashima echoes both the words and the head movement of her daughter. This moment of interactive attunement is not the sort commonly described: it is not truly mutual. Mashima's upholding of her end has the forced quality of Western mothers treating neonates as if they could manage "adjacency pairs" in proto-conversation as full interactional partners do. Admittedly, Olna retains the rudiments of sensitivity to adjacency pairs (able at times to exchange phatic moves, but often not getting the semantic content right). But it is Mashima who unilaterally constructs her verbal relationship with her daughter as mutual by her echoings of Olna's moves, as if to compensate for Olna's failure to echo others' moves or engage them in any sustained interaction. Mashima's

behavior reproduces an aesthetic of language as intersubjective achievement and as pragmatic order. It enables her family to carry on, glossing over Olna's problems, or providing enough scaffolding to produce the appearance that Olna is doing her share of the interactive work.

I point you to section 2 on your handout, now greatly compressed:

I consider such on-the-ground responses to speech to be paradigm cases of linguistic ideologies. At the same time, the term "ideologies" itself may divert us from an adequate or at least experience-near analysis of folk judgments of naturally-occurring speech. The problem is that embodiment and aesthetics may be the **last** meanings unreflexively evoked by the term ideologies. Definitions of "ideology" focus on "the ideational dimensions of culture" rather than foregrounding the tait and embodied.

Yet encountering Olna's case and particularly her family's metacommunicative values leads us to suspect that on-the-ground language ideologies are as much concerned with style, form, and skillfulness as they are with cognitive precepts. It is in this sense that they are aesthetic, but also tacit and embodied; linguistic ideologies as well as the speech they objectify are forms of habitus. The dominance of ae**sthe**tic criteria in Olna's family's evaluation of speech acts— in fact their aesthetic model of language per se— brings us up short to the extent that our understanding of language ideologies requires them to be ideational in a narrow sense.

If we rethink "ideologies" as gut senses, we shake up our models of the relations between ideologies, aesthetic sensibilities, and embodiment. Work on linguistic ideologies

has rightly stressed their positionedness in relation to power; it is useful to bring that metaphor back to its embodied ground as prise-de-conscience (Hanks 1996).

I CONCLUDE W/ SECTION 3 ON YOUR HANDOUT.

This Bangladeshi family's speech actions entail a level of social and linguistic reflexivity that makes it problematic to treat them only as data, grist for our theoretical mills; they deserve consideration as ethnomethods on a par with our theories, including the very model of linguistic ideologies. If so, this family's organic theorizing bears comparing to that of Croce and Sapire who envisioned language as social aesthetic. Isn't our sense of good language— phonologically well-performed, grammatical, and pragmatically appropriate speech— is built out of tacit, visceral aesthetic sensibilities?

Olna's mother's use of her body to guide Olna toward attunement—despite Olna's discontnet with its perceived bonds—is an embodied mode of action with which Merleau-Ponty, Tom Csordas, Bob Desjarlais, and Bill Hanks have tried to make us more comfortable. If the connotations of "ideology" appear mentalist and Machiavellian, Olna's family falls into a long line of theorists with a different imagination of what we are calling "ideologies."

Echoing widely accepted criterial attributes of linguistic ideologies, the words "Speak beautifully" do attempt to regiment discourse, and are tinged with power, and are positioned a in social field. Shapla's words are redolent with ideology—but "ideology" in a new key that has resonance, perhaps, for all research on metapragmatic regimentation in face-to-face interaction.