

Involvement in linguistic practice: An ethnographic appraisal[☆]

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Abstract

This paper is a critical examination of ‘involvement’ as an analytic category in sociolinguistics and discourse analysis. The discussion first identifies a variety of conceptual problems associated with the nature and locus of involvement. Then a number of ethnographic studies focusing on the relationship between language use, emotionality, society, and culture are described, and the usefulness of involvement as a descriptive and theoretical tool is evaluated. This paper shows that involvement, a notion which assumes Western views of interaction, emotionality, and personhood, does not adequately capture the essence of the interactional dynamics described in these ethnographic reports. An alternative agenda is outlined, in which the relationship between emotionality and linguistic practices is solidly grounded in a critical examination of the cultural and social dynamics in which it is embedded.

1. Introduction: Involvement as an analytic category

Involvement was originally invoked systematically as an analytic category in two closely related areas of research in sociolinguistics and discourse analysis. The first of these is the tradition of ‘interactional sociolinguistics’ heralded by Gumperz’s (1982) work on discourse strategies and communicative distress in cross-ethnic and cross-cultural interactions. In this body of work, ‘involvement’ refers to conversationalists’ willingness and ability to initiate and sustain verbal interaction. Involvement is seen as a prerequisite to the success of any conversational encounter, and is rendered possible by the presence of a shared body of linguistic and socio-cultural knowledge among conversationalists. The second body of research in which the notion of involvement figures prominently focuses on linguistic variation across

[☆] The Nukulaelae data presented here were gathered and analyzed with funding from the National Science Foundation, the Harry F. Guggenheim Foundation, and the Wenner Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research. I am grateful to Angelique Haugerud for her comments on portions of the discussion, and to Ian Condry for his invaluable assistance in writing this paper.

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spoken and written modes of communication (Chafe, 1982, 1985; Chafe and Danielewicz, 1987; Tannen, 1985). In this area of inquiry, spoken language has been presented as structurally and stylistically different from written language in terms of several functional parameters, including involvement: spoken language, particularly when it is produced and consumed in face-to-face contexts, contrasts with written language insofar as its structure reflects the greater attention that speakers pay than writers to the act of communication, to the needs of their interlocutors, and to the 'experiential richness' of their verbal output. In turn, writers are primarily concerned with "producing something that will be consistent and defensible when read by different people at different times in different places, something that will stand the test of time" (Chafe, 1982: 45), and thus pay less attention to the interactional aspects of communication. Tannen (1985) takes the contrast between speaking and writing a step further, showing that the relative focus on involvement on the part of interactor is the central distinction between 'oral' and 'literate' behavior, rather than speaking and writing: forms of writing that are highly involved are really oral-like, while instances of spoken discourse that exhibit little involvement are literate-like. The former is illustrated by notes that school children exchange with one another (Tannen, 1988: 105–106), and an example of the latter is academic lecturing.

Involvement is generally viewed as the product of the form of language use. In everyday conversation, for example, it is created and maintained when speakers consistently employ a variety of linguistic 'strategies', defined broadly as "systemic way[s] of using language" (Tannen, 1989: 15). Tannen (1989) provides the most explicit discussion of the relationship between linguistic form and involvement, focusing on three linguistic strategies which she finds to be particularly powerful markers of involvement: the repetition of phonemes, words, and phrases, both within and across turns; reported speech, for which she finds 'constructed dialogue' a more appropriate label; and the use of detail and imagery. Constructed dialogue, for instance, creates involvement in the following manner: "By giving voice to characters, dialogue makes story into drama and listeners into an interpreting audience to the drama" (1989: 133). Making sense of a reported dialogue thus requires the active participation of both speakers and interlocutors, and hence drafts the involvement of all concerned participants in the process of constructing linguistic and interactional meaning. Reported dialogues exemplify one range of involvement strategies, namely strategies which depend on the collaboration of interlocutors in the derivation of meaning from form. This type of involvement strategy contrasts with another type, associated with the exploitation of recurrences in sound patterns. For example, the repeated occurrence of particular linguistic units, such as phonemes, words, or expressions, gives the discourse an engaging rhythm and meter, which draws the attention of interlocutors to the discourse, thereby involving them in the deployment of interaction. In many contexts of social life, it is on the successful use of involvement strategies of both types that the persuasive power of talk and writing depends.

Many areas of linguistic structure have been shown to contribute to the creation and maintenance of involvement. Emphasizers and hedges (Chafe, 1982), questions (Frank, 1989), ideophones (Nuckolls, 1992), ellipsis (Villaume and Cegala, 1988),

code-switching (Gumperz, 1982), back-channel cues and overlaps between turns at talking (Tannen, 1984) are examples of linguistic strategies which, when used with systematic frequency in interaction, contribute to the heightening of interpersonal involvement. In addition, researchers have often associated involvement with a high degree of reliance on nonlinguistic cues, such as facial expressions, gestures, and intonation (Tannen, 1984, 1985). Thus, it is not just the form of discourse which creates involvement, but also the interaction of linguistic and extra-linguistic aspects of communication.

Involvement overlaps with and conjures a great many other categories, some better established in the analysis of verbal interaction than others. For example, work in conversation analysis has shown how conversationalists display, in a highly coordinated fashion, various degrees of ‘engagement’ (or of its opposite, ‘disengagement’) with posture, gaze, and the formulation of their utterances; the amount of engagement displayed by interactors changes rapidly during a conversation, and these changes can dramatically affect the course of interaction (Goodwin, 1981). Other categories with at least some theoretical relevance to the notion of relative involvement include intensity (Labov, 1984), emotional identification (e.g., with the topic of discourse or with interlocutors), high vs. low affect, relative distancing, participant status, point of view, and alignment.

Despite the fact that involvement has been accorded a central position as an analytic unit in a growing body of literature, there have been relatively few attempts to define it precisely and to distinguish it from related analytic concepts. As I will argue here, this lack of attention to definitional rigor is symptomatic of the difficulties involved in coming up with such a definition. Indeed, whatever definitions have been offered in the literature indicate that the notion is extremely broad in scope. Tannen’s treatment is a good example: according to this author, involvement is “an internal, even emotional connection individuals feel, which binds them to other people as well as to places, things, activities, ideas, memories, and words” (1989: 12). Similar themes are invoked by Lakoff’s definition of involvement as “emotional connection, interest, and concern” (1990: 49). As these quotes suggest, the definition of ‘involvement’ as an analytic category in sociolinguistics does not differ significantly from the sense commonly associated with the term ‘involvement’ in middle-class Western folk psychology, where it is commonly thought of as synonymous with ‘engrossed’, ‘concerned’, and ‘emotionally committed’.

This paper is a selective survey of research on the notion of involvement with an unabashedly subversive secondary agenda: to critically assess the extent of the validity of the notion as an analytic tool for understanding language use across individuals, contexts, and social groups. This survey seeks to evaluate the relative usefulness of involvement in understanding the social dynamics of language use in a variety of ethnographic contexts. While recognizing the importance of recent work on the nature and linguistic manifestations of involvement, I will show that, in its current form, the notion is at best problematic as an analytic tool. Furthermore, I will argue that the problems associated with the notion result from the fact that its current definitions are rooted in a Western ethnopsychological understanding of social interaction. Sociolinguists who have made use of the notion have thus generalized their

folk epistemological understanding of intra- and interpersonal processes, and have promoted it to the status of a culture-independent theoretical framework. In this paper, I will consider ways in which the notion of involvement could be refined and relativized so as to give it enough malleability for it to be of use in cross-cultural investigations of relationships between linguistic practices and their social context.

The agenda of this paper may appear more destructive than constructive to readers familiar with traditional discourse-analytic and sociolinguistic approaches. Indeed, to date, much research in discourse analysis has sought to explain text-level phenomena exclusively in terms of cognitive categories, of which involvement is an example, failing to consider the possibility of socio-cultural explanations that emerge when a more ethnographically-grounded approach is adopted (cf. Fairclough, 1985; Ochs, 1979). This paper falls squarely in a tradition of inquiry that has scrutinized, in the light of ethnographically-informed work, the categories that works in pragmatics, sociolinguistics, and discourse analysis have universalized uncritically (e.g., Irvine, 1979, on formality, Rosaldo, 1982, on speech-act typologies, Keenan, 1976, on conversational implicatures, Brenneis, 1987, on indirection, and Briggs and Bauman, 1992, on genre). Typically, ethnographic deconstructions of such categories have shown them to be at least in need of some refinement. While I do think, with most discourse analysts, that theoretical generalization is necessary if one is to understand how human interaction works, I will also suggest, with most socio-cultural anthropologists, that generalizations can be found in observing the particular ways in which human interaction is contextualized in specific cultural contexts. This particularistic stance, typical of work in social and cultural anthropology, is far from being incompatible with a search for an understanding of patterns underlying human behavior: it is only through the interplay of particularistic and universalistic approaches that our understanding of the dynamics of human interaction can progress.

2. Some questions and problems

I now turn to a number of conceptual problems associated with the notion of involvement. I shall first address the question of what involvement should be contrasted with, then turn to a discussion of what involvement is a characteristic of, and will finally investigate the nature of the relationship between linguistic form and involvement as a social and cognitive unit of analysis. Through an examination of the problems that these questions suggest, I shall identify aspects of the notion in need of theoretical clarification.

Which analytic category contrasts with involvement? In other words, if a segment of discourse is found to be high in involvement when it exhibits many characteristics traditionally associated with involvement (e.g., reported speech constructions, repetitions, imagery), how does one describe a segment of discourse with few such characteristics? Concerned with the differing characteristics of spoken and written texts, Chafe (1982) first proposed that involvement be contrasted with detachment. Following Kay (1977), Chafe observed that written language prototypically is more

autonomous from its non-linguistic context than spoken language, and that this relative autonomy is the result of the absence of a tangible audience from the context of written production. Because of this autonomy, writers display less of an emotional commitment to communication than speakers.¹ The detached quality of writing is reflected in the fact that relatively few involvement strategies are used in writing, and in the preponderance in written texts of certain linguistic features which give it a detached quality: passive constructions, indirect quotes, impersonal expressions, etc. Adding a further twist to the picture, Lakoff (1990) pitches involvement against the notion of ‘considerateness’:

“Considerateness uses the opposite strategy [from involvement]: long waits before taking a turn; relatively steady and unremarkable articulation, conventional expression; no touching or addressing by name; few back channels, little overlap or interruption. Where involvement is exciting, creates interaction, but is often aggressive, considerateness is blander, less involved in the conversation but more receptive to others speakers’ needs.” (Lakoff, 1990: 50, punctuation as in the original)

It is not clear that Lakoff’s terminological choice is an improvement on ‘detachment’. Indeed, involved styles can easily be placed in contexts where they will be perceived as considerate, if one interprets the meaning of ‘considerateness’ in its everyday sense of paying attention to the feelings and needs of co-conversationalists.

As many researchers have pointed out, there are problems with the characterization of written texts as detached or considerate, and with dichotomizing involvement with detachment or considerateness. Preferring ‘focus on content’ to ‘detachment’ (because if one is not involved in the interactional context, then one’s attention turns to the content of discourse), Tannen (1985, 1989) argues that there are many genres of writing which do not conform to the characterization of literacy as lacking involvement. For example, successful fiction can recreate the emotional intensity of face-to-face interaction and it is on the relative felicity of this recreation that the success of fictional texts depends. Tannen characterizes such texts as ‘mixed’ genres, because they draw together, in the context of a single genre, the involvement of face-to-face interaction with the conventions of writing.

But more fundamental questions must be asked about the nature of the alleged detachment of ‘non-mixed’ communicative genres, of which Western middle-class scientific speaking and writing are prime examples. Sociological research on Western scientific settings has demonstrated the importance of norms of disinterestedness, organized skepticism, and universalism in the scientific ethos (cf. Merton, 1973), but has also shown that these manifestations of emotional facelessness are only ideological constructs, i.e., ways in which native participants make sense of their world and justify their own actions (Gilbert and Mulkay, 1984; Mulkay, 1991; Prelli, 1989). Highly subject to naturalization (e.g., through statements like ‘science can only be practiced successfully by disinterested participants’), these ide-

¹ It is interesting to note that the term ‘detachment’ in reference to the writer’s emotional stance is a metaphor which conjures what Ricœur (1981) has called the ‘distanciation’ of written texts from their context.

ological constructs coexist with overwhelming evidence that the social practice of science is driven by anything but emotional neutrality. The perceived detached and autonomous nature of scientific texts is only a manifestation of the ideology prevalent in a certain scientific tradition, and of the ideological underpinnings of the communicative practices associated with this scientific tradition. What these remarks suggest is that one needs to distinguish between involvement and detachment as manifestations of a particular cultural ideology on the one hand, and involvement and detachment as analytic constructs in the description and interpretation of linguistic behavior on the other. Unfortunately, this distinction is frequently blurred, a result of the fact that involvement as an analytic concept is invariably defined in impressionistic, intuitive terms.

The second problem that current treatments of involvement present is closely related to the above discussion. Is involvement a characteristic of individuals, social groups, contexts, or discourses? Most sociolinguists assume that involvement concerns the interpersonal, interactive, or conversational aspects of behavior (indeed, 'interpersonal involvement' and 'involvement' are frequently used interchangeably, as in Tannen, 1985). Nevertheless, as Chafe (1985: 116–117) points out, involvement can have one of three loci. First, an individual may be primarily involved with his or her own concerns, and produce discourse primarily centered on him- or herself. Second, a speaker or writer may be concerned primarily with the needs of their interlocutors, or with the interpersonal dynamics of the interaction with their interlocutors. Third, involvement can focus on the discourse itself, as in the case of a storyteller and audience who become engrossed in a narrative. (Presumably, this third kind of involvement potentially characterizes both the speaker and the audience.) While the three types of involvement may go hand-in-hand in certain contexts (Tannen, 1989: 139–140), each may have significantly divergent effects on either the discourse or the extra-discursive interactional context. For example, the self-involvement of a speaker can easily occur with a lack of involvement in the interactive context and a lack of concern for the interlocutor. Different types of involvement can have independent values and consequences, a topic which remains largely unaddressed to date.

More seriously, the relationship between the psychological and socio-cultural attributes of involvement remains largely unexplored. While it is likely that, in all social settings, some sort of psychological connection between interactors is a prerequisite for successful communication, the nature and extent of this necessary psychological connection differ greatly across groups, subgroups within societies, and situations. Contrast, for example, cultures in which interlocutors are expected to provide a steady flow of back-channel cues whenever another interactor is holding the conversational floor (as in many Mediterranean speech communities), and cultures in which a non-interfering, impassive demeanor is the norm associated with listenership (as in much of Native North America). In each context, particular involvement-marking discourse strategies will have dramatically different social meanings: it is one thing to express involvement because the norms of one's culture dictate that this should be done as a matter of course, and a very different thing to mark involvement because one is moved to do so in a particular situation, despite the devaluation by one's culture of the frequent marking of involvement.

Also brought into the picture by questions of the relationship between the psychological and socio-cultural meaning of involvement is the thorny problem of ‘sincerity’ (Irvine, 1982), i.e., the extent to which communicative displays of involvement can be ‘read off’ unambiguously by interlocutors as symptoms of ‘genuinely felt’ psychological attributes of involvement (e.g., interest in the interaction or the topic, concern for the needs of other interlocutors), or of meaning ‘intended’ by the language producer. As Duranti (1988), Stroud (1992), and others have argued, Western conceptualizations typically present interpersonal communication as taking place in a free market between autonomous, rational agents, who may choose to engage or not to engage in particular linguistic practices (cf. Brenneis, 1992: 7). In this framework, recipients decode the meaning of the discourse that speakers produce by relying on a straightforward model of the symbolic relationship between form and meaning. If it turns out that the meaning decoded from linguistic signs is not the same as the meaning intended by the speaker, a variety of explanations are invoked: the decoder misidentified the linguistic form (e.g., misheard it), the speaker was insincere, or the decoder did not share the same relevant norms of interpretation as the speaker. Crucially, these explanations all presume that discrepancies between the specific meaning intended by the producer and the meaning computed by the decoder are cases of communicative distress or breakdown. However, there is evidence that in other cultural contexts, interactors may operate on the basis of completely different premises. For example, Stroud (1992) shows how communication between Gapun villagers in Papua New Guinea is always assumed to be opaque: thus, a particular linguistic practice like code-switching always has a multitude of possible meanings. In this context, the inherent potential ambiguity of all utterances rests on fundamental aspects of Gapun epistemology. Far from being residual or communicatively distressful, ambiguity is assumed to be basic to human communication. In such an epistemological framework, involvement would have very different characteristics than it has in the context of the Western view of communication that has served as the basis upon which involvement has been traditionally defined. Such ethnographic studies of the importance of cultural ideology in shaping the form of interaction (cf. Silverstein, 1979) cast severe doubt on the cross-cultural applicability of involvement as an analytic category.

Finally, questions arise regarding the relationship between linguistic form and involvement as a category of linguistic meaning. As discussed earlier, involvement is commonly associated with the frequency and discourse prominence of strategies regularly associated with it, such as pronominal reference, repetition, and reported speech. Thus, if a language user relies heavily on these strategies to construct discourse, or otherwise give them rhetorical prominence, this individual is said to be highly involved in the discourse or the interaction. This definition of involvement rests solely on the form of discourse, which gives it a somewhat circular flavor: involvement is the result of the frequent use of involvement strategies, and the frequent use of involvement strategies is the result of involvement. Because much of the literature on involvement pays little attention to the extra-linguistic context of interaction, it fails to offer a way out of this circularity. Clearly, evidence for the validity and relevance of the category must be identifiable in local ethno-episte-

mologies of interaction. While this evidence may be available in Western middle-class communicative models, the extent to which involvement is relevant to the way in which human communication is understood in other cultural contexts remains unclear.

Even in social settings dominated by a linguistic ideology to which the researcher has access by virtue of social membership, the relationship between linguistic form and social meaning is potentially problematic. For example, interactors may be particularly engrossed in particular aspects of a communicative situation, while failing to demonstrate this involvement overtly in language use. That this is not always a symptom of individualistically motivated deviousness is illustrated, again, by Western scientific discourse. Here, norms of interaction dictate that communication take place in a style characterizable as low involvement. However, many rhetorical strategies available to scientific writers enable them to travesty high personal involvement (and other manifestations of emotional arousal) as 'reason', which is socially more acceptable than involvement in these contexts (Bailey, 1983). Thus, the relative low prominence of involvement strategies in scientific discourse may coexist with a high degree of non-linguistic involvement on the part of the participants. This inconsistency between linguistic form and extra-linguistic meaning cannot be explained by invoking the communicative uncooperativeness of the language producers, since the latter are simply applying context-specific norms of interaction.

Furthermore, a form-based approach to involvement leaves open the question of how involvement strategies interact with one another. Is the affective meaning of different involvement strategies somehow computed algebraically, so that their effect can be thought of as cumulative? What happens when discourse simultaneously presents both high-involvement and low-involvement characteristics? As an example of the latter, take certain styles of 'faceless' argumentative writing, in which the author engages in a 'dialogue' with quotes selected from the writings of authors with opposing views. What is the effect of the simultaneous prominence of the faceless strategies common in scientific discourse and of constructed dialogues (quotations being always constructed because they are always selectively chosen and extracted from their original discursive and extra-discursive context)? It is not clear where such a text should be placed along a continuum between low and high involvement.

The glimmer of a solution to this problem is suggested by the recognition that affective dimensions of language, including involvement strategies, are semiotically complex, a complexity they owe primarily to their status as indexes (Besnier, 1990). Like all other instances of indexicality, they are highly polysemic and frequently ambiguous, and their meaning always depends on the linguistic and social context in which they occur. Take, for example, reported speech. Reported speech can indeed add vividness to discourse, as many researchers have noted. While this vividness commonly has the effect of marking some sort of emotional interest in, or identification with, the text on the part of the text-producer (Tannen, 1989: 93–133), the frequent use of reported speech can also have many other linguistic and social functions. For example, it often (and perhaps always) serves to establish a particular rela-

tionship between the moment of reporting and the reported events, and thus constructs particular ‘historical’ relationships between social events (e.g., Bauman, 1986, and many others). By the same token, constructed dialogues can align participants in both the reporting event and the reported event in a particular manner, thus creating, reproducing, or altering the nature of social relationships (cf. Briggs, 1992). In short, the creation of involvement is only one of the semiotic functions of reported speech, and the prominence of reported speech in a discourse fragment cannot be assumed to generate involvement automatically. Rather, the social meaning of particular discourse strategies like reported speech should be investigated through specific reference to features of the extra-linguistic context, such as folk understandings of the social value of discursive styles, and to the characteristics of the social relationships between participants, events, and narration.

3. Involvement and ideology

In this section, I present data from several ethnographic settings to illustrate in further detail the problems presented above and to suggest possible avenues to resolve them. The following discussion focuses primarily on the place of culture in the psychological processes commonly subsumed under the label ‘involvement’. I shall show that the relationship between linguistic practices and psychological processes is mediated by cultural categories, and that this mediation is the process through which linguistic meaning is constructed. I shall suggest that researchers turn to local ethnopsychology for an understanding of the socio-cultural ‘work’ that interactors accomplish through interaction.

It has long been recognized that social groups differ from one another in the degree to which high or low involvement is viewed as necessary and valuable. For example, Tannen (1984) characterizes American Jewish (and presumably middle-class) interactional styles as ‘high-involvement’ styles, in contrast to Anglo-American middle-class styles in which less value is placed on the cooperative construction of discourse and the display of positive affect towards interlocutors. However, ethnographic evidence from other cultural settings suggests that the one-to-one association between social groups and emotional styles implicit in such characterizations is based on an oversimplified view of communicative norms. Indeed, emotional styles are more successfully characterized in terms of social contexts, which, in turn, are defined by culture.

A fascinating example is provided by Abu-Lughod’s (1985, 1986) ethnography of loss and grief among the Bedouin of Northern Egypt. When Bedouins talk about loss in public contexts, they describe their reaction to it as one of indifference or stoicism, or perhaps of anger, as when loss is associated with being abandoned by a spouse. The detached indifference and stoicism invoked in everyday contexts is constitutive of Bedouin prescriptive conceptualizations of personhood, according to which a person is a fortress of fortitude and *maîtresse de soi*, whose central concern is the maintenance of honor and autonomy across all situations. This idealization, which echoes comparable themes found throughout the Mediterranean world, is

highly gendered, in that the normative man is constructed as the prime exemplar of this idealized elaboration. However, the Bedouins compose a genre of sung poetry called *ghinnaawa*, the central theme of which is grief and loss. Following are examples of two *ghinnaawa* stanzas:

illi marīdh fih yāsāt
warrūnī duwā dāhā asmu.

(Abu-Lughod, 1986: 204)

Ill and full of despair
 shown me what medicine could cure this malady.

shjirat khātrī min il-yās
zamān mōta 'urūghā.

(Abu-Lughod, 1986: 191)

Long shriveled from despair
 are the roots that fed my soul.

As these excerpts illustrate, the emotional stance that the *ghinnaawa* represent is antithetical to the stance expressed in everyday conversation: the pain, sadness, longing, and despair that loss engenders in the vulnerable and weak composer or performer is what the *ghinnaawa* are all about. Because they 'violate' the overt elaboration of honorable fortitude and manhood, the poems are associated principally, on the one hand, with intimate contexts and, on the other hand, with women.

A possible analysis of the puzzling contrast between public discourse and the *ghinnaawa* would posit that representations of emotion in the latter are more genuine than in the former, or closer to the composer's or performer's inner self, while everyday conversation represents a more filtered and socially mediated version of emotionality. Abu-Lughod argues specifically against this analysis. She shows that the *ghinnaawa* are subject to rigid poetic rules, and that their resulting form is highly formulaic and ritualized. These formal characteristics militate against viewing these poems as the 'cries of the heart' that cannot be heard in public contexts: the involved, vulnerable, emotionally charged discourse of the *ghinnaawa* is no more and no less subject to social and cultural constraints and definitions than the everyday discourse of detached invulnerability. In addition, Abu-Lughod demonstrates that the various ideological stances articulated across interactional contexts are crucially interdependent. First, the fact that the poems are only recited in highly bracketed social settings highlights the importance of aspects of the person elaborated in all other contexts of social life, such as honor. In other words, the bracketing of *ghinnaawa* performances contributes to the maintenance and cultural elaboration of honor. Furthermore, because a much broader repertoire of sentiments surfaces in the *ghinnaawa* than in public contexts, the *ghinnaawa* provide evidence that the performer or composer is in control of her or his emotions in public contexts, and thus that she or he is essentially an honorable person. By the same token, the very existence of the poems underscores that conforming to ideals of personhood is hard work. Abu-Lughod's ethnography underlines the fact that styles of interaction are

intimately bound to cultural constraints, that emotionality is centrally dependent on a specific cultural logic, and that this logic can be complex. In other words, interactional styles, degrees of involvement (if I can still use such an imprecise label), and affect in general are regulated by an *economy of affect* that is constituted by linkages between particular types of emotions, tensions between various social contexts, and ideologies of personhood (Besnier, 1991; McElhinny, 1993). In short, emotionality and related processes, notably personhood (cf. Poole, 1991), are complex cultural constructs that are embedded in social and cultural processes upon which they depend for their very definition.

Abu-Lughod's analysis of Bedouin discourse of grief challenges an implicit assumption underlying many sociolinguistic characterizations of involvement, to the effect that an involved interactional style is more basic in spoken interaction than a detached style. This assumption is evident in the natural association that many researchers find between involvement and highly informal, everyday conversation, which is widely taken to be the most fundamental manifestation of verbal interaction. Interpersonal dynamics (e.g., the maintenance of a good rapport between participants) is a considerably more central concern in conversation than, say, the form of what is said (Tannen, 1985), and the centrality of this involvement leaves a strong imprint on the form of conversational discourse. When spoken interactions are characterized by few involvement strategies, the resulting discourse is said to be literate-like, i.e., untypical of the spoken mode (cf. Tannen, 1985). Because the *ghinnaawa* is both much more emotional and much more literary than everyday public discourse, the picture that Bedouin society presents is obviously problematic for such associations, suggesting that the dynamics of style and emotion must be explained in a more localized fashion.

Many ethnographic contexts offer comparable evidence that what appears at first glance to be the direct mapping of emotionality onto linguistic practice is actually mediated by socio-cultural signs. This turns out to be the case even when emotional involvement is taken to be an expression of the basic physiological experience of emotionality (whatever that may be) by insiders to the culture. Trance phenomena and mediumship episodes of various kinds – contexts on which little linguistic work has been conducted – offer particularly vivid illustrations. The Polynesian inhabitants of Nukulaelae Atoll, in the Central Pacific, recognize a mild trance-like state, which they call *matagi* (literally, 'wind[y]') and which may occur in a variety of contexts. The principal symptom of it is a display of intense excitement associated with whatever activity is going on in the context in which it occurs. The trance can be most clearly isolated during the performance of a *faatele*, a form of 'traditional' singing and dancing in which the tension and tempo of the choreography, and the volume and tempo of the singing and percussion accompaniment, gradually increase, and finally come to an abrupt end. Dancers, spectators, and singers can be 'hit' (*poko*) by a *matagi* episode during a *faatele*. When this happens to dancers, they 'break frame' from the otherwise highly controlled choreography, and execute a brief twirl on their feet, with arms extended, while whooping and smiling rapturously; when members of the chorus have a *matagi* episode, they get up and gesticulate wildly in time with the singing, or join in the dancing.

Matagi can also ‘hit’ an orator during a speech-making performance, or a preacher in the pulpit of the atoll’s Congregationalist Christian church. The fact that *matagi* is invoked in different contexts and for different phenomena indicates that it is an ethnopsychological category of some analytic stature in Nukulaelae culture. Preachers are said to become *matagi* when their sermon deliveries gradually take on a highly marked antiphonal structure in which strings of words uttered with great voice intensity alternate with strings of words uttered in a conversational tone. Sermon performances can become so loud and powerful that they often leave the preacher hoarse for several days. Following, is the extract of a transcript of such a sermon, in which loudness is indicated with capitalization:

TAAVINI KI TE ALIKI, KEE OKO KI TE FAKAOTIGA, *kee maua ei nee koe (mo au) a te ola e see gata mai. IEESUU KELISO, TE ATUA MO TENA FILIFILIGA, ne aumai nee ia a tena fua tasi KEE MATE KEE OLA KOE I TE TAEAO TEENEI, kee ola te lalolagi KEE OKO ATU EI TAATOU ki te ola e see gata mai, maafai taatou e taavini ttonu ki te Atua. TE ALIKI TEELAA E MAUA EI NEE KOE A TE OLA i te ola e see gata mai.*

(sermons: M 1991:2:A:073-079)

SERVE GOD UNTIL THE END, so that you (and I) can live for ever and ever. JESUS CHRIST, GOD AND HIS CHOICE, who brought [us] his only child TO DIE IN ORDER FOR YOU TO LIVE THIS MORNING, in order for the world to live SO THAT WE ALL LIVE for ever and ever, as long as we serve God as we should. [This is] THE LORD THROUGH WHICH WE CAN LIVE for ever and ever.

Echoing the crescendo of secular dancing, sermons acquire features associated with *matagi* only gradually, as the preacher gets warmed up. Crucially, Nukulaelae Islanders greatly approve of successful *matagi* performances. They recognize in it evidence of the ‘genuine’ nature of the preacher’s delivery, and evidence of the truth of the sermon’s message, even though its manifestation sounds forced to a foreign ear. Members of the congregation can be moved to tears by the ‘sorrow’ (*ootia*) of a *matagi* sermon. Phenomena comparable to religious *matagi* on Nukulaelae are found in other cultural contexts, notably African-American evangelical and revivalist sermons (cf. Davis, 1985; Holt, 1972; McGinnis, 1986; Rosenberg, 1970; Smitherman, 1977, and many others), although the latter have rather divergent characteristics from *matagi* sermons on Nukulaelae.

A particularly interesting aspect of *matagi* episodes during sermon performances is the lack of an identifiable relationship between voice quality and syntactic or pragmatic structure. Changes from loud to normal voice can occur between any major constituents, e.g., between superordinate and subordinate clauses, or between topicalized noun phrases and their comments, or within constituents. In the above extract, one finds subjunctive subordinate clauses uttered in either normal voice (*kee maua ei nee koe (mo au) a te ola e see gata mai* “so that you (and I) can live for ever and ever”) or loud voice (e.g., *kee mate kee ola koe i te taeao teenei* “to die in order for you to live this morning”), and clauses in loud voice are neither more nor less

informationally prominent than other clauses. What then is the microscopic organization of changes in voice quality?

Hill's (1989) skillful analysis of the occurrence of weeping in the life-history narrative of a Mexicano (Nahuatl) woman provides a suggestive avenue. Doña María's story is an emotion-laden narrative of a complex array of misfortunes and injustices of which she was the victim, and which involved many members of Doña María's community. Replete with reported-speech constructions and other markers traditionally associated with involvement, it epitomizes what would traditionally be described as a highly involved narrative. In the course of the narrative, the narrator-protagonist displays many aspects of her personhood, and animates the voices of numerous participants, principally through reported speech. In addition, she overlays certain segments of the narrative with weeping. Yet, despite Mexicano concerns with the 'accuracy' of voice representation in reported speech, weeping does not map systematically onto the participant structure of her narrative; for example, weeping does not always co-occur with narrative recreations of her own turn at talking. Hill shows that the lack of clear timing between weeping and the structure of the narrative provides evidence to the audience of the sincerity of the narrator's emotional display. Had the weeping occurred too predictably, it would have invited critical scrutiny of Doña María's integrity and of that of her narrative.²

To return to Nukulaelae sermons, I hypothesize that alternations in voice quality in sermon delivery are similarly structured: a more careful choreography of voice quality and linguistic structure would compromise the 'genuine' quality of the *matagi* performance. Neither Hill's analysis of Doña María's narrative nor my tentative remarks about Nukulaelae sermons imply that the structuring of discourse is in any sense conscious or deliberate. Rather, both cases are illustrations of the importance of socio-cultural mediation in the structuring of even the most spontaneous communicative action.

The point to be stressed here is that what appears to native observers as highly spontaneous, unconstrained displays of involvement is in fact carefully structured. First, *matagi* can only take place in certain bracketed contexts. Secondly, the behavior judged to be appropriate is tightly constrained by the context in which the episode takes place. For example, the dancer's *matagi* is not appropriate in church, while the preacher's *matagi* makes no cultural sense in the *faatele* performance. We thus have an example here of a single phenomenon, etically recognized as evidence of 'genuine' emotionality, with distinct manifestations across contexts. Thirdly, within a particular context, a *matagi* performance must be coordinated with other aspects of the event. For example, it must be eased into with a gradual crescendo in both dance performances and sermons. Clearly, cultural mediation permeates all aspects of *matagi* episodes. Furthermore, it is clear that trance-like behavior in *faatele* dances and sermons can only be accounted for successfully through a fine-grained investigation of the nature of *matagi* (I have presented here just a sketch), i.e., of the ethnopsychological category on which autochthonous explanations rest. In

² Hill's analysis has further ramifications which I do not wish to go into here.

other words, while linguistic and nonlinguistic behavior during *matagi* episodes fall under the general rubric ‘high-involvement style’, it is clear that this characterization will do poorly if one aims for an explanatory model for these data, rather than a mere description. (It is not even clear that ‘involvement’ provides a very good description of the dynamics at play.)

4. Involvement and society

Having described how cultural processes and categories mediate the relationship between emotional involvement and the form of verbal interaction, I now turn to questions of the interplay between involvement, linguistic form, and social structure. Focusing on one ethnographic case study, I investigate in this section one aspect of the dynamics of society, namely power. That power is an important dimension of the stylistic organization of interaction is recognized in the literature on involvement. However, its importance is usually identified only when interactors ‘disagree’ about the norms matching involvement to context. For example, in a volume pertinently entitled *Talking Power*, Lakoff (1989: 50) documents the difficulties that can arise when users of high-involvement styles interact with users of what she terms ‘considerate’ styles. Because users of high-involvement styles tend to speak a lot, they dominate the interaction, and perceive users of considerate styles as boring and passive. In turn, the latter perceive the former as domineering and impolite, and the result of these perceptions is power asymmetry. Lakoff’s characterization of power in discourse typifies the way in which the relationship between power and involvement is depicted in discourse analysis: power is a microscopic entity, problematized only in situations of normative disharmonies between interactors.

However, questions of power in interaction do not only arise in communicative contexts involving users of different interactional styles. Even in interactions where all participants use congruent styles of interaction, questions of power often lurk in the background. Furthermore, even though power asymmetries and social inequality are often reproduced microscopically through interaction, they are also key characteristics of the extra-interactional context. Indeed, recent work on the role of language in political economy shows that there are very few contexts in which macroscopic manifestations of power, hierarchy, and inequality are not relevant (cf. Gal, 1989; Irvine, 1989). Understanding how microscopic and macroscopic forms of power are interrelated is one of the fundamental questions of current work on language in its social context.³

Haugerud and Njogu’s (1991) ethnography of political rallies in Kenya, or *baraza*, provides a striking illustration of the grounding of interactional styles in the politics

³ An understanding of this relationship requires that the nature of power be investigated seriously not only at the interactional level, but also at the societal level. Unfortunately, sociolinguists often limit themselves to the former; for example, it is significant that, in *Talking Power*, Lakoff makes virtually no reference to the vast social theoretical literature on power.

of power.⁴ The *baraza* is a staged political gathering, during which members of the ruling class engage in displays of political oratory that offer audiences a glimpse of the workings of the state and behind-the-scenes political intrigue, among other things. Attendance to the *baraza* is obligatory though unevenly enforced, and crowd participation is carefully, but more or less spontaneously, choreographed. A striking illustration of this choreography are frequent rhythmic exchanges of slogans between orators and audiences. For example, in the following excerpt, a cabinet minister (CM) and the audience engage in a vigorous exchange, in which president Daniel Arap Moi's slogan *nyayo* 'footsteps' is given legitimacy by association with former Kenyan president Jomo Kenyatta's national slogan *harambee* 'let's pull together':⁵

CM: *Ha::ra::mbee::!*

Crowd: *Nyayo!* [...]

CM: *HA::RA::MBEE::!*

Crowd: *NYAYO!*

CM: *HA::RA::MBEE::!*

Crowd: *NYAYO!*

CM: *RAIS MOI WAPI?*

Crowd: *JUU!*

CM: *Serikali yetu wapi?*

Crowd: *Juu!*

(Haugerud and Njogu, 1991: 22, partial transcript)

CM: Let's all pull together!

Crowd: Footsteps! [...]

CM: LET'S ALL PULL TOGETHER!

Crowd: FOOTSTEPS!

CM: LET'S ALL PULL TOGETHER!

Crowd: FOOTSTEPS!

CM: HOW IS PRESIDENT MOI?

Crowd: UP HIGH!

CM: How is our government?

Crowd: Up high!

This exchange, and all other interactions that take place in the context of the contemporary Kenyan *baraza*, is made up entirely of question–answer sequences, repetitions, and parallelisms, features traditionally associated with high-involvement styles. In this respect, there is little or no difference in the interactional styles of orators and audiences.

⁴ Haugerud and Njogu stress that *baraza* have been undergoing rapid transformations in the context of the volatile nature of the Kenyan political scene. Their discussion should therefore be situated in the historical context they provide for each meeting.

⁵ Much code-switching to and from KiSwahili, Gĩkũyũ, and English takes place in *baraza* oratory and audience responses; for the sake of simplicity, code-switching is not indicated in the excerpts quoted here.

Yet power is a crucial and complex dimension of *baraza* interaction. Haugerud and Njogu present an analysis of several *baraza* during which orators elicit tokens of audience compliance to the recently imposed prohibition. In one *baraza*, a local politician (P) echoes the techniques that the cabinet minister employs in the previous excerpt, eliciting from the audience political slogans associated with national authority:

P: *Aria meekuuga karubu kathire mookirie njara!*

Crowd: *Kathire! Kathire!* ((noise))

P: *Aria meekweenda kathii na mbere ni mookiririe njara!*

Crowd: ((noise and laughter)) [...]

P: [...] *Haya! Aria meekweenda kathire njara iguru!*

Crowd: *Hooo!*

P: *Heeragwa Nyayo! Harambee!*

Crowd: *Nyayo!*

P: *Harambee!*

Crowd: *Nyayo!*

(Haugerud and Njogu, 1991: 24, partial transcript)

P: Those who say traditional beer should be banned, raise hands!

Crowd: Ban it! Ban it! ((noise))

P: Those who want beer to continue, raise hands!

Crowd: ((noise and laughter)) [...]

P: [...] All right! Those who want it banned, hands high!

Crowd: Ban it! Completely! ((applause))

P: Let's all pull together!

Crowd: Hooo!

P: It is said, "Footsteps!" Let's all pull together!

Crowd: Footsteps!

P: Let's all pull together!

Crowd: Footsteps!

A few days later, a follow-up *baraza* took place, in which a member of parliament engaged the crowd in a striking call-and-response exchange, during which phrases uttered by the M.P. are 'answered' by the audience clapping in unison; the following is a brief excerpt of the lengthy exchange that ensued:

M.P.: *Ni: twaa: ti: gi: re: njoo: vi!*

Crowd: ((claps three times in unison))

M.P.: *Natutikumienda riigi!*

Crowd: ((claps three times in unison))

M.P.: *Nitwamitigire!*

Crowd: ((claps three times in unison))

(Haugerud and Njogu, 1991: 30–31, partial transcript)

M.P.: We gave up alcohol!

Crowd: ((claps three times in unison))

M.P.: And we don't want it again!

Crowd: ((claps three times in unison))

M.P.: We left it!

Crowd: ((claps three times in unison))

The crucial detail backgrounding these events is that the prohibition targets sugarcane and beer that are produced by small-scale farmers and sold by small-time traders, i.e., by the very people who constitute the *baraza* audience. In fact, the production and sale of home-brewed beer occupies a central place in the economic life of many people. Not surprisingly, off-stage gossip about prohibition bears witness to intense public opposition to the ban of beer, in sharp contrast to the message conveyed by the *baraza* audience's heartily approving tone. The *baraza* offers a means by which ruling elites elicit overt public approval of a clearly unpopular measure.

Crucially for my argument, the interaction that takes place during the *baraza* exhibits many features of high-involvement styles, and these features characterize both the verbal contributions of leaders and audiences and their non-verbal contributions, such as clapping. Thus the *baraza* offers a striking example of how a speech event in which all participants use the same interactional style can nevertheless be a context in which one set of participants defines political reality and imposes this definition on others, i.e., exerts power, as classically defined, over the rest of society. Crucially, the style of the interaction is instrumental in the exercise of power.

One could account for this case study by simply positing the audience's displays of high involvement as 'false' and 'insincere', but Haugerud and Njogu demonstrate that such an analysis is too simplistic. Indeed, *baraza* interactions have an important secondary audience, namely the rest of the country, which is kept informed about the events by the national press. The conspicuous presence of the press during a *baraza*, which orators frequently allude to, is in part geared to give audiences the impression that they are playing an important role in the national political arena, that they are 'making history', as it were. It is therefore a matter of local pride to put on a good show in the eyes of the nation. In addition, audience members are aware that evidence of a lack of enthusiasm in a particular district for decrees from above could move higher officialdom to take negative sanctions against the district. It is thus to the advantage of the district that a good show be put on in the course of a *baraza* that is well covered by the press. Finally, Kenyan official rhetoric depicts government authority as a necessary buffer against social chaos, as manifested in neighboring Uganda's regime of terror, and Kenyan public opinion endorses this characterization, at least in part. Thus, the enthusiasm for the government that *baraza* participants display reinforces the buffering effect that governmental policy is thought to have in warding off social chaos. Rather than being an instance of 'insincere' displays of high involvement, audience participation in the *baraza*, however coerced, has a complex meaning:

"Apparent crowd enthusiasm overlays a mix of flattery, cynicism, fear, and a willingness to be entertained. Nevertheless, whatever their private beliefs, when a large audience is moved to a hearty display of support for the ruling regime, the appearance of consensus becomes a forceful reality in itself. A benign reading of *baraza* might see in them expression of playful artifice, as audiences and speakers alike enthusiastically shout political slogans such as 'nyayo'! Cast differently, such events are a secular

ritual whose practice helps to reproduce the relations of domination that sustain the national political economy.” (Haugerud and Njogu, 1991: 35–36)

These ethnographic materials from Kenya have important consequences for an understanding of the relationship between interactional styles and social constructs. First, interactional stylistics can be instrumental in the affirmation of power without any normative asymmetry surfacing in microscopic aspects of the interaction. Second, power asymmetry can be affirmed without one party being ‘insincere’ in its participation in the interaction; the interactional dynamics of the *baraza* involve considerably greater complexity than a ‘sincerity’ account would make room for. Third, and more generally, what is traditionally described as ‘involvement’ in interaction cannot be divorced from the social processes that it helps reproduce, enact, and, sometimes, change. An exclusive focus on microscopic manifestations of these social processes clearly cannot begin to tap into the complexity with which power is articulated in interaction.

5. Conclusion: Analytic categories as the product of naturalization

This paper has considered various aspects of the notion of involvement as an analytic category in sociolinguistic work. I began by noting problems associated with the imprecise way in which the notion is defined. Questions arose regarding the categories with which involvement contrasts, the locus of involvement in interaction and society, and the relationship between linguistic form and involvement as a psychological category. I then turned to a number of ethnographic studies, and assessed the extent of the usefulness of the notion in understanding the relationship between linguistic practices and their cultural and social contexts. Through an examination of these ethnographic materials, I showed that conceptual problems emerge in traditional depictions of the nature of involvement and its relationship to context.

Sociolinguistic work that relies on involvement as an analytic category assumes a particular view of linguistic meaning and interaction, one in which meaning is created by separate individuals, who in most circumstances are rationally motivated to produce unambiguous and aesthetically pleasing utterances, which will be decoded as such by interlocutors. While these rational agents may act in concert in some situations (as in the case of ‘high-involvement’ conversations in which several participants contribute to the construction of discourse), they nevertheless remain separate entities in the unmarked case, whose behavior is more or less assumed to be consistent across contexts, although it is subject to slight adaptive variations. Deviations from this are viewed as breakdowns in communication, created by a lack of sincerity on the part of one or more participants, or by superficial normative differences among participants, such as disagreement over how much involvement should be displayed in the conversation. This conceptualization of linguistic meaning and interactional norms, while deeply rooted in Western thinking, does not constitute a universal, culture-free, and theoretically grounded framework.

The contrast between high involvement and its opposites, i.e., low involvement, detachment, considerateness, or focus on content (be they considered to be dichoto-

mous or simply two poles of a continuum), belongs to a long-standing Western tradition of viewing feeling and thinking as fundamentally dichotomous in the makeup of human beings: while feelings are subjective, irrational, and potentially problematic (although useful as resources in certain contexts), thoughts are objective, rational, and controlled. In recent years, psychological anthropologists have cast doubts on the universal applicability of this and other related dichotomies (e.g. passion vs. reason, heart vs. mind), arguing that the contrast is a reification of the Western commonsensical conceptualization of personhood, which many other cultures do not share (Lutz, 1988; Lutz and White, 1986; White, 1992). While this conceptualization and its components may be useful in understanding human action and interaction in Western settings, their usefulness in other social and cultural settings is limited. I am thus suggesting that the notion of involvement is the product of a naturalization process, through which society- and culture-specific processes are mistakenly identified as psychologically rooted universal phenomena and reified as such. This naturalization has led many researchers to transform the essentially indexical relationship between language and context into a system of symbols.

Is involvement a salvageable analytic tool? It is very possible that involvement constitutes a useful heuristic device in understanding discourse processes in certain contexts, but it lacks explanatory power. Involvement is too broad a notion to be of analytic use, and finer distinctions must be made in the analytic categories that students of language in context invoke. Furthermore, it is imperative that the relationship between analytic categories and autochthonous understandings of interactional processes be the focus of serious scrutiny. Thus, while I agree with Nuckolls' (1992: 75) suggestion that there may be different types of involvement in interaction, I suggest that these different manifestations are not so much determined by linguistic form, but by linguistic and cultural ideology. Finally, the relationship between language form and emotionality (in which I include involvement) must be understood as mediated by its social and cultural context: social inequality and power relationships extant in society, cultural definitions of the person and its emotional manifestations, and ideological discourses on authority, sincerity, and truth, are all examples of extralinguistic dynamics from which the meaning of verbal interaction is constructed, and which must be closely scrutinized at the same time that the form of interaction is investigated.

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