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ARTICLE

Introduction to "Synesthetic Encounters"

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Abstract
The articles in this issue examine activity routines in which sensory experiences form the basis of both practical and social coordination. In the ethnographic phenomena that the authors examine, successful coordination between actors almost always requires engagement across multiple senses and practices of sensory expertise, as well as between discursive and non-discursive signs. It is in this spirit that we offer the organizing concept of synesthetic encounters. We advocate for an ethnographic approach to language and synesthetic encounters that foregrounds: (1) a situated practice analysis of the senses, (2) attention to the continuum between improvisation and conventionalization in the use of lexicons for sensory calibration, and (3) the metapragmatic regimentation of sensory experience in specific contexts toward specific ends.

Keywords: metapragmatics; practice; reference; sense

Introduction

The articles in this issue examine activity routines in which sensory experiences form the basis of both practical and social coordination. In the ethnographic phenomena that the authors examine, successful coordination between actors almost always requires engagement across multiple senses and practices of sensory expertise, as well as between discursive and non-discursive signs. It is in this spirit that we offer the organizing concept of synesthetic encounters. Synesthesia often refers to the mixing of prototypically separate sensory channels (see Meneley 2008). Here, we invoke synesthetic encounters as a broader metaphor that encompasses a range of interactions among the senses, as well as among persons who are both sensing and social. In this introduction, we highlight an ethnographic approach to language and synesthetic encounters that foregrounds: (1) a situated practice analysis of the senses that grows from the work of Charles Goodwin (1994, 1997), (2) attention to the continuum

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between improvisation and conventionalization in the use of lexicons for sensory calibration, and (3) the metapragmatic regimentation of sensory experience in specific contexts toward specific ends.

Synesthetic encounters as situated practice

The relationship between language and the senses is an old preoccupation in anthropology that can be traced at least to the work of Franz Boas. In Boas's 1889 article "On Alternating Sounds," he famously observed that a listener may perceive sounds in an unfamiliar language as if they alternate, shift, or evade categorization, and yet those same sounds become stable, categorizable, and meaningful when they are part of a listener's linguistic and cultural experience. Boas used this observation to argue that a person's current sensory experience is based on their personal and cultural perceptual histories, and further, to argue for cultural relativism (1889; see Glazer, this volume, for an extended discussion). The articles in this volume touch on an issue not unrelated to Boas's early observations: They examine how people use discourse to coordinate with one another across both learned and situational differences in sensory experience.

The anthropology of the senses began to see an especially rich development about a century after the publication of Boas's 1889 article. In the 1980s through the early 2000s, this scholarship intersected with anthropological attention to media (Howes 1991), materiality (Seremetakis 1994), phenomenology (Ingold 2000; Stoller 1989), and multimodal ethnographic methods (Feld 1990), often in critique of Western ocularcentrism (e.g., Classen 1993; for a counter-critique of vision in anthropology, see Grasseni 2009, 2010). Yet, as Thomas Porcello, Louise Meintjes, Ana Maria Ochoa Gautier, and David Samuels suggested in their 2010 Annual Review of Anthropology article on the topic, "a recurring feature in the anthropology of the senses is [with some exceptions] its rejection of language, discourse, and semiotics as modes for encountering and understanding the sensuous cultural world" (59). The authors argued for "treat[ing] discourse as part and parcel of processes of embodiment and knowledge and sense-making" (Porcello et al. 2010, 61; for a related critique and argument, see Cox 2018).

Since 2010, linguistic anthropologists have drawn on the pioneering work of Nancy Munn (1986) to theorize qualia as a powerful tool for understanding relationships between language and the senses (Chumley 2017; Chumley and Harkness 2013; Harkness 2013, 2017). This literature's focus on conventional or enregistered qualia and qualisigns has allowed for insightful interventions into the anthropological study of materiality, affect, and ontology. It has done so by drawing attention to how qualisigns come to bridge sensory channels and ontological levels between tangible and intangible entities, encounters, and communicative events (Chumley 2017). Paul Manning elaborates in his commentary on the way this volume attends ethnographically and analytically to qualia as affective encounter. Here, in complement, we highlight the way this volume's authors analyze activity routines and interactions that surround and frame such qualia or sensory experiences.

In doing so, we advocate for a return to a tradition of linguistic anthropological engagement with the sensory that grows from Charles Goodwin's concepts of "situated practice" and "professional vision" (Goodwin 1994, 1997). In Goodwin's article

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"The Blackness of Black" (Goodwin 1997), he ethnographically examines how a geochemistry professor teaches students to identify the "jet black" hue of the chemical reaction that they are monitoring in their lab, which will enable them to create a scientific instrument for measuring the radium signature of bodies of water. Goodwin argues that "jet black" does not function in the lab as a context-free universal color term. Instead, it is a dialogically agreed-upon social fact that emerges only within the geochemists' learned and situated practices of seeing, or their "professional vision" (Durkheim 1984; Goodwin 1994, 1997, 131). One of Goodwin's arguments is that cognitive categories (or, in a more recent idiom, ontologies) such as colors emerge dialogically alongside both the sensory phenomena they describe and participants' acts of describing (1997). In this volume, the authors expand Goodwin's work beyond vision to include other sensory modalities and their interrelations (see Porcello 2004 for a discussion of "professional audition" or listening). We also expand Goodwin's approach beyond professionalized activities to include a wide range of communities of practice, including multiple and even antagonistic communities. In doing so, we advocate for an approach to a linguistic anthropology of the senses that is equally useful in understanding both highly conventionalized and improvisatory interactions. This approach also accounts for both fleeting and persistent differences between participants as social and sensing persons.

Improvisation and enregisterment in the calibration of sensory lexicons

The articles in this volume attend to discursive-sensorial semiosis that unfolds both within and beyond enregistered sensory lexicons and texts. We ask when lexical registers become useful for coordinating sensory experience, and we examine the improvisatory practices that make these lexicons work successfully in certain situations but not others. We do so by attending to the sensory calibration that occurs through varying degrees of improvisation, on one hand, and repetition, convention, or enregisterment on the other (Agha 2007). Here, our concept of sensory calibration draws on Michael Silverstein's notion of pragmatic calibration (Silverstein 1993). We use sensory calibration to refer to the mutual reckoning or commensuration (Carruthers 2017) of sensory experiences of two or more people with respect to one another, such that joint attention and coordinated activity become possible.

For Goodwin's geochemists, "jet black" is an enregistered lexical item within a genre of "geochemistry talk"—enregistered as such by virtue of its inclusion in the manufacturing instructions for the scientific instrument that the geochemists are producing (1997, 119). In this instance, learning to be a geochemist requires learning to correctly affix the adjectival label to a given instance of black through embodied and situated sensory and discursive practices. In other words, competence in the register that includes "jet black" is not simply a matter of context-appropriate language usage. It also requires learning a set of context-appropriate, non-discursive sensory attunements to the physical and social world (126).

The authors in this volume demonstrate, like Goodwin, that the use of conventionalized sensory lexicons or qualisigns is rarely sufficient to achieve either successful reference or coordination in practical tasks. Instead, myriad improvisatory linguistic and extra-linguistic strategies make sensory lexical registers referentially successful in

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the interactional here and now. In Xiao Schutte Ke's analysis of animal scat identification on the Tibetan plateau, she demonstrates how Tibetan and Chinese conservation scientists use improvised adjectives to build rapport and coordinate their perspectives on scat pellets, even while they draw on differing knowledge and social positions in relation to local wildlife. As Schutte Ke writes, "to analyze these adjectives and adjectival phrases as deixis allows us to understand a register not only as indexing social stereotypes but also as inviting attention and coordinating perspectives in socio-discursive spacetime." In a similar vein, Juliet Glazer analyzes how a violinist and a luthier use improvisatory adjectival predicates such as "like AM radio noise type hiss" to refer to a violin's timbre, alongside the more conventional cross-modal adjectival metaphor "metallic." This improvisatory interplay ensures the two participants attune to the same instrumental timbre, such that the luthier can alter it by physically adjusting the violin's component parts.

The papers in this volume also provide a way to understand spontaneity or improvisatoriness as itself a conventionalized, and even lexicalized, qualia and enregistered qualisign. Berimbolo, a jiujitsu move, demonstrates this neatly. Jay Ke-Schutte shows that the berimbolo move appears to the uninitiated as a perplexingly random physical scramble. In fact, this is precisely the point, because it enables those in the know to use the berimbolo to disarm unsuspecting opponents. Yet, the haptic and visual qualia of scramble turn out to be a motion text that is produced through carefully rehearsed choreography. Once Ke-Schutte learns to recognize and perform the berimbolo himself, he comes to understand it not only as a tightly choreographed move but also as an enregistered icon of personhood: the bolo-player. Relatedly, Zhuoli Gao shows how street dance students learn to freestyle by recognizing and producing qualia of spontaneity that their teachers describe through the qualic-deictics "that" and "relation." For example, one teacher frequently tells students, "when you listen to this music, you find a way to relate." Gao describes such words as deictics or shifters in that they have no determinate denotational meaning, and yet indexically project alignment between speaker and hearer. At the same time, "that" and "relation" come to "index immaterial and sensorial qualities," especially a conventionalized if difficult-to-describe spontaneity in skilled dancers' freestyle performances.

Metapragmatics of sensory experience

The articles in this volume engage with the metapragmatics of sensory experience by attending to the ways that the senses are made distinct from one another and to the ways that these sensory dimensions rise to the ethnographic foreground or recede into the background in various situations. We argue that analytical attention to the sensory is productive, not only in ethnographic settings in which sensation is the topic of explicit metapragmatic discussion, but also in settings in which the sensory is powerful precisely because it remains beneath the level of metapragmatic awareness (Silverstein 1981).

Implicit in the model of synesthesia is an ontology of multiple distinct senses. Anthropologists studying the senses have noted that the idea of (five) distinct senses is not unproblematic (e.g., Howes 2009). As Aliyah B. D. Dewar remarks, "the realities of sense-perception are quite a bit more complex (…) but what is relevant for our

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purposes is how these different senses are metapragmatically categorized as distinct sign-channels" (this volume). We are interested in how the metapragmatic chunking of sensory experience unfolds through both discursive and non-discursive means. The sense organs themselves, as well as cultural frameworks for understanding how they work, regiment which sensations are experienced as visual, auditory, or olfactory (for example), or some relation between these.

The articles in this volume show how linguistic practice helps to differentiate and coordinate across sensory modes. In the activities described herein, participants make use of the metapragmatic distinctness of the senses to achieve their practical goals. Learning improvisatory dance requires not only learning bodily movements and affective attunements but also learning how to watch others dance (Gao). Violin sound adjustment combines the luthier and violinist's practices of listening alongside their visual and haptic engagements with the instrument (Glazer). Scat identification requires visual investigation of shape and size as well as haptic engagement to determine qualities such as crumbliness (Schutte Ke). In each of these cases, discursive repertoires serve to bring different sensory inputs together, triangulating between senses that are treated by participants as if they are distinct.

In addition to coordinating across sense channels, discursive practice also enables people to interact and coordinate successfully across their sensory differences, often by making metapragmatic use of them. With the exception of Dewar's brief engagement with farsightedness or presbyopia among elderly readers, the articles in this issue describe coordination across sensory differences that are primarily a result of differences in training, perspective, or enculturation. Take, for example, Ruby, a Christian customer of a halal butcher at Mumbai's Crawford Market. She appears in Shaheed Tayob's exploration of halal butchering practices. Ruby finds the sights and sounds of butchery to be instinctively disgusting. Yet, she represses any outward expression of her disgust as a sign of respect for what she knows to be the butcher's intimate and professionalized daily experience with these same sensoria. Or consider Ke-Schutte's discussion of his own sensory experience of the berimbolo as it changes from the confusing scramble of the uninitiated novice to the carefully choreographed sign of an eccentric and stylized jiujitsu persona. Glazer's luthier reminds her that the violin sounds different to each of them by virtue of their relative embodied positions with respect to the sound source or instrument, while also implying that they may have different auditory attunements to the instrument due to their different training. The conservation scientists in Schutte Ke's paper take note of different sensory dimensions of scat by virtue of their distinct linguistic frameworks, as well as their different positions in relation to science, land, and the Chinese state.

Metapragmatic talk about sensing and the body makes the sensory domain particularly available to ethnographic attention. Such talk often occurs in pedagogical settings. Apprenticeship and learning contexts such as the ones described by Gao and Ke-Schutte, and in a more extended sense by Glazer and Schutte Ke, have often served as sites for ethnographies of the senses, especially when the ethnographer themselves is learning to sense skillfully in a specialized domain (Cox 2018; Grasseni 2010; Weidman 2012). There is perhaps a wider array of ethnographic settings in which the sensory recedes beneath the level of metapragmatic awareness in ways that are of practical significance. For example, in Dewar's discussion of social reading practices in Taipei, the

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backgrounding of the material dimensions of texts enables textual circulation in general. It also enables specific practices of transduction, such as reading aloud, which underlie people's ability to read together in book groups. In Tayob's exploration of halal butchering, halal itself is not typically directly perceptible to customers, especially those who subscribe to an inter-Muslim ethics based on trust in the face of opacity. Butchers are disdainful of untrusting customers' new efforts to ensure perceptible signs of halal in neoliberal Hindu Mumbai, such as customers' requests that butchers' prayers be made audible and visible to them when they purchase halal meat. The juxtaposition of the articles in this volume demonstrates that it is important to ask why, how, and to what ends certain sensory channels—and the sensory more broadly—rise to the level of metapragmatic awareness in some ethnographic settings but not others.

This observation leads us to argue that the relevance of sensory experience—or of particular metapragmatically separated or interrelated senses—to ethnography does not necessarily come from objects of attention themselves, such as sound or taste or touch. Rather, it also comes from the practices that metapragmatically highlight or occlude the role of the sensory in people's interactions with such objects and in their interactions with other people via such objects. As such, while some of the papers in this volume tackle prototypical objects of sensory lexicons and skilled sensing, such as music/sound (Glazer), sport/motion (Ke-Schutte, Gao), and food/taste (Tayob), others consider objects less commonly understood as sensorily relevant, such as animal scat (Schutte Ke) and texts (Dewar). Yet, the senses turn out to be just as important in these cases.

Conclusion

Across diverse ethnographic phenomena, the authors in this volume demonstrate the ways that situated and improvisatory communicative practice enables sensing persons to navigate and negotiate synesthetic encounters, that is, encounters among the senses and encounters with differently sensing others. Together, these articles raise a number of avenues for further research on language and the senses. To briefly name but a few: What is the role of (dis)ability in synesthetic encounters? When and how do discursive-sensorial practices intersect with the production of value, construed either as meaning or as money (Graeber 2001; Kockelman 2020)? What might be the productive relationships between a linguistic anthropology of the senses and the efflorescence of multimodal and intermedial ethnographies (Cox 2018; Feld 2024; Pink 2010)? We look forward to future contributions that take up these questions by attending to the intertwining of language and sensory experience.

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