



Hustle, twitter, bells and banter

Description

Free beer! C.S. Peirce and semioticians make much of the meaningful call out of someone like a street vendor. A cry or call out from someone giving away, selling or hustling goods at a market fits one of Peirce's sign categories.

To be precise, it is a kind of *dicent indexical legisign*. The sign is complete (*dicent*) in that it delivers its sign function without further qualification. The call of the street vendor is an *index* in that it references its object other than through resemblance, and it is a *legisign* in that you need to know the language being spoken and the verbal conventions of the street crier. See post: [Full indexical jacket](#).

Repetition in place

Peirce's highly technical description misses the fact that the call out is repeated. It is the repetition that carries the obvious force of the sign in this case. Peirce does write about repetition, but mainly in connection with *habits*. Repetition reinforces habits. I don't think he makes this connection, but habit relates to *habitat*, which is a spatial thing. I have developed the theme [elsewhere](#) that repetition is one of the devices for defining space. So it fits.

The usual means of indicating territory are to attack or defend, threaten, and mark boundaries with signs (scents, fluids, and modifications to the environment). In survival terms, animal populations balance the high cost of patrolling territories against the benefits of having a predictable food supply. Mammals also mark out territory via sounds.

In their account of sonic environments Augoyard and Torgue assert that in the case of birdsong, "territory is defined by a certain number of repetitions, and perceived by others as a spatial shape" (94), and it is not the first or second occurrence of the birdcall that marks the territorial claim, but the occurrence of a "significant series."

Birds and other creatures may define territory through the repetition of sounds, but is there evidence for similar spatialization within human communities? Think of the newspaper seller on the street who repeats the cry.

Any passerby hears the call more than once, as if it is the repetition that draws attention to the territorial claim and the possibility of a transaction. The call also excludes other potential vendors from the immediate vicinity. Furthermore, calls repeated with less regularity, and with arbitrary variation, seem to assert less of a claim on space.



Claiming space

Our study into the sounds of market stallholders revealed nuanced definitions of space. Competing callers modulate, synchronize, and generally negotiate their spatial claims with great subtlety, in situ, and for the moment. The process is one of a dynamic tuning, an instantaneous calibration of complex rhythms that defines spaces of overlap and territorial borders.

Similar observations apply to the incessant repetition of sound in other spaces of contest, such as the open outcry on the bidding floor of the traditional stock exchange, and the call of an auctioneer.

Bell towers have also exercised this territorial function in towns and villages, with the bells sounding repetitive signals at different times of the day and for particular events. In an essay on auditory markers in traditional villages, Alain Corbin draws attention to the correlation between “bell and boundary and between bell ringing and processions” (118). The loudness of the bell also related to the extent of the parish or community’s boundary.

During the political demonstrations in Tehran in July 2009, there were poignant videos on Youtube of the cityscape redolent with the cries of “Alah-o Akbar” from ordinary citizens on rooftops. The sonic repetitions supplemented the ceaseless flows of messages on Twitter. By coincidence or by design, the claim on the space of the city was permeated with sound: from the metaphor of the “tweet” to the open outcry of invisible voices.

Meaningless banter

Repetition duplicates or copies what went before. As such, repetition is an aspect of reproduction, or mimicry. Mimicry features in territorial assertions in several ways. In our studies we observed how groups of friends deploy vocal mimicry when they enter each other's company.

Repeated listening to field recordings of a group of teenagers speaking loudly on the London Underground highlighted repetitions of phrases, a kind of arbitrary (deictic) banter in terms of communicating meaning, but one serving to define the subarchitecture of the group as it moves through the crowds.

Such banter involves the reiteration of an in-joke deployed in humor, and as a means of gaining the upper hand, imposing exclusion and territorial definition. As Augoyard and Torgue assert, "teenagers' conversations seem to be filled with onomatopoeia, interjection, and deictic words borrowed from the media or cartoons . . . the imitation effect activates a feeling of belonging" (62).

Deictic utterances are those for which the listener needs to know the context in order to ascertain any meaning. Such exclusive uses of terms in language, whether spoken in groups or into mobile phones ensures that if the conversation is overheard it is not understood. Thus the loud conversation can be deployed to stake out and claim territory independently of the putative meaning of what is being said, and by deliberately covering over any meaning.

As far as I can tell, "deictic" is not in Peirce's lexicon. Neither is "banter." The closest category is *dicent indexical legisign* but multiplied.

References

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Category

1. Voice and text

Tags

1. banter
2. ciphercity
3. deictics
4. Peirce
5. semiotics

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