



Trash talk

Description

Like most urban commuters I have learned to tune out other people's mobile phone conversations. But when I'm forced to attend to one-sided overloud jibber-jabber the interlocutor may as well be speaking in code. "She said that?" "He did it then." "Ask him to give it to me when I'm there."

Deixis

Deictic utterances are those for which the listener needs to know the spatial and temporal context in order to establish meaning, and just hearing one side of a conversation makes it difficult to discover that context.

I discussed deictic language (*deixis*) in a blog post last year ([Hustle, twitter, bells and banter](#)). It's a characteristic of the way we use pronouns, and a message so conveyed accords with C.S. Peirce's semiotic category of *dicent indexical legisign*. See post: [Full indexical jacket](#).

City codes

Language users are of course adept at speaking to one another so that potential eavesdroppers would have to work really hard to get the gist of the conversation. Avoiding proper names and other overt references to the subject matter is one way of coding the conversation.

Another is to use abstruse terminology. In discussing this kind of coding I've drawn on themes developed in my 2010 book *The Tuning of Place*, pages 96, 100, 109-110 and 121. There I focussed on the mimetic and repetitive nature of arcane signals to claim space.

I'll restate a passage from the book that brings out the coded nature of such exchanges. I also paraphrased it in [Hustle, twitter, bells and banter](#).

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 (subway system) highlights repetitions of phrases, such as “you’re a genius,” 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. It is 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.” 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 overt meaning of what is being said, and by deliberately occluding meaning (96).

The quote about teenagers is from page 62 of Jean-François Augoyard and Henry Torgue’s book *Sonic Experience: A Guide to Everyday Sounds*. As I’m currently investigating codes and the city, it makes sense to think about the everyday tactics deployed by ordinary language users to make themselves clear but also obscure.



Ebonics 101

Used out of context we might also describe such exchanges as vulgar, common, or even obscene. It’s interesting that such banter is associated with the street. After all, we draw on the terminology of urban infrastructure to identify this coded use of language (“street talk,” “gutter language”) and the aptly named online *Urban Dictionary* (www.urbandictionary.com) is full of it.

From that source I just discovered the word *ebonics*, politely described in the OED as “African-American English, esp. when considered as a distinct language or dialect with linguistic features related to or derived from those of certain West African languages, rather than as a nonstandard variety of English.”

The Urban Dictionary provides a more [disparaging explanation](#): “A poor excuse for a failure to grasp the basics of english. When in doubt, throw an ‘izzle’ sound in the middle of any word or just

string random thoughts together and insinuate that they actually mean something.â?•

Well it may mean something for those to whom the interlocution is directed â?? or in a phase I scraped off the Urban Dictionary, â??Donâ??t be tellinâ?? me dat I canâ??t talk good cuz I speak ebonics.â?•

References

- Augoyard, Jean-Fran ois, and Henry Torgue. 2005. *Sonic Experience: A Guide to Everyday Sounds*. Trans. Andra McCartney, and David Paquette. Montreal: McGill-Queen s University Press
- Coyne, Richard. 2010. *The Tuning of Place: Sociable Spaces and Pervasive Digital Media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press

Note

- Image is of graffiti artist on the banks for the River Soar, Leicester, taken last week.
- I like the way US anchor Ari Melber on a news show called [The Beat](#) manages to interject the occasional rap, hip-hop and street reference into otherwise straight-talking commentary.

Category

1. Architecture

Tags

1. ciphercity
2. code
3. deictic
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