

Comments on ritual unintelligibility

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The 1950s saw a group called the Cellos produce a hit called ‘Rang Tang Ding Dong’: in the same period, Little Anthony and the Imperials produced ‘Shimmy Shimmy Koko Bop’; the Boss-Tones came out with ‘Mope-ity Mope’; and Gladys Knight and the Pips gave us ‘Ching Chong’. This doowop musical tradition in the United States, suggests David Samuels (Samuels 2004), was a challenge to the boundaries between language and nonlanguage, sense and nonsense.

He argues that what made doowop work as a musical genre was the way it systematically disrespected a master trope of modernity: that language is a tool for clear and transparent communication. It was perhaps no accident that this music—which one commentator called the ‘silliest music ever invented’—occurred exactly at what was surely one of the high-water marks for a peculiarly American species of sincere, technological, and scientific modernity.

How do these flare-ups of linguistic silliness and nonsense have their roots in beliefs about verbal seriousness and sense? We are familiar with some of the Western story of how the sensible, comprehensible character of language was constructed: Western Europeans moved into Africa, America, and Asia in the 1600s and 1700s and encountered unintelligibility on a scale never imagined before (Bauman and Briggs 2003). Projects of bureaucratic state-building required tidy language, with clear, transparent meanings, dictionaries with fixed references, a common shared vocabulary.

Bursts of systematic, even institutionalized, nonsense appear at various points along this historical storyline. Some of them subversive, some humorous, some individual, others more collective; some religious, some more secular; some serious, others more ludic and playful. One of the best documented is surely the nonsense literature that evolved for children in the 1800s (Lecerle 1990).

What is interesting is that each one implies the construction of an Ontological Other: in the case of nonsense literature, it implied the construction

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1 of a fictionalized and idealized creature called a child—freed from the
2 constraints of clear and transparent language. In the case of doowop, it
3 counterposes a ludic marginalized population of playful sociability against
4 a more sensible narrative tradition of story-based songs and discourse that
5 is ‘about’ something, not just the performance of the voice. All the papers
6 in this special issue on unintelligible language deal with nonsensical locu-
7 tions that in various ways involve the construction of Ontological Other:
8 whether that is gendered Other (in Jacobs’s Levantine data), spiritual
9 Others (in the case of Wirtz, Kang, Donzelli) and, in the case of Lempert,
10 a sort of moral Other, constructed for disciplinary purposes.

11 The production of verbal unintelligibility does not happen all by itself:
12 it takes work and the careful organization of verbal resources. This struc-
13 turing may occur on several different levels. *Phonological unintelligibility*,
14 such as that just described for doowop, is a variety of nonsense in which
15 the strings of sounds do not correspond directly to any particular refer-
16 ents, but they nonetheless have textual and intertextual ‘meaning’ in a
17 broader sense in that they are part of a recognizable genre. Children’s
18 verse and glossolalia rely on this level of linguistic organization to com-
19 municate unintelligibility (Jakobson et al. 1983; Malony and Lovekin
20 1985; Courtine 1988; Lawless 1994; Certeau and Rosenberg 1996). Var-
21 ious kinds of *syntactic unintelligibility* can involve classic well-formed sen-
22 tences that are nonetheless highly problematic in a propositional sense,
23 e.g., ‘colorless green ideas sleep furiously’; ‘George W. Bush is the best
24 president in U.S. History’; ‘Condoleeza Rice is an excellent president’
25 (Uhlenbeck 1985). *Semantic unintelligibility*, in which perfectly intelligible
26 words are applied to referents in a way that the meaning is not clear or
27 obvious, perhaps with poetic or occult effects. Many of the papers in this
28 volume examine the exploitation of this dimension of verbal structure. Fi-
29 nally, one might also speak of various kinds of *pragmatic unintelligibility*,
30 in which the usages of the speakers are not clear or transparent, and ap-
31 pear to violate one or more conversational maxim (Grice 1975, 1978).
32 While lying is the most simple example and is usually a deliberate, decep-
33 tive departure from the truth, Frankfurt (2005) describes ‘bullshitting’ as
34 a kind of nonsense talk in which the speaker has no regard for the truth at
35 all and instead merely seeks to impress.

36 The *ritual unintelligibility* in these six papers draws on all these dimen-
37 sions, in different ways and to varying degrees. In all cases, however, the
38 justifications for these marked, distinctive, and specialized departures
39 from ‘ordinary’ communicative norms of conduct are broadly sacred,
40 spiritual, institutionalized, and collective; speakers and performers do not
41 engage in these forms of ritual unintelligibility purely for personal amuse-
42 ment or for self-fulfillment.

1 Just as doowop reminds us of the historical specificity of nonsense, the
2 papers in this volume call attention to its cultural and geographical spe-
3 cificity. In this sense, it is not surprising that two of the six papers should
4 be from the Indonesian archipelago, where there is a long and rich re-
5 gional history of distinctive, poetic forms of parallelistic ritual speech as
6 part of the Austronesian cultural legacy (Fox 1988). In this part of the
7 world, it is not uncommon to use these unique forms of speech as a way
8 of constructing ancestral spirits as ontological Others. In both the Toraja
9 case reported by Donzelli and the Petalangan case described by Kang,
10 ritual speech is a variant of the local language, languages now under con-
11 siderable pressure from the central state language, Indonesian.

12 In her paper ‘Words on the lips and meanings in the stomach: Ideolo-
13 gies of unintelligibility and theories of metaphor in Toraja ritual speech’,
14 Aurora Donzelli gives some examples of how the relative semantic opac-
15 ity of ritual speech in this eastern Indonesian society disrespects the mas-
16 ter trope of Indonesian modernity as conveyed in the Indonesian national
17 language. She carries out interviews with *basa tominaa* speakers to learn
18 more about their ideologies of intelligibility; while many of the ritual
19 speech utterances are not readily understandable to the lay person, that
20 does not mean they are unintelligible. Indeed, one of the local beliefs is
21 that these words are the very embodiment of ancestral truths; truths
22 which are difficult. The idea that they are unintelligible can also be attrib-
23 uted to a growing social sense that the ancestors themselves should
24 perhaps best remain unintelligible (and even silent) in an increasingly
25 modern, future-oriented society obsessed with its own headlong rush into
26 modernity.

27 Donzelli’s comparison of the Indonesian and Toraja versions of funer-
28 ary oratory is a striking example of the clashes between these two ideolo-
29 gies of language. She notes ‘a palpable sense of disjuncture’ between a
30 speech addressed to the common people for whom the hidden references
31 of the high Toraja words are obscure, and a speech for those who can see
32 the meanings of these ciphered references perfectly well. These acts of
33 translation are themselves key moments in which the boundaries between
34 intelligibility and unintelligibility are reproduced and maintained. As one
35 who has also experienced similar events in which so-called translations
36 occur, I can attest that there does indeed seem to be an implicit message
37 that these two contexts are utterly incompatible, one unintelligible to the
38 other. The speaker/translator often uses the moment to call attention to
39 his or her role as gatekeeper between these two domains.

40 The two—the Toraja and Indonesian language ideologies—are not
41 merely different. The Indonesian language domain of performance is rep-
42 resented as being referentially transparent and clear, while the Toraja

1 language is regarded as being opaque, obscure, and indirect. Donzelli's
2 work raises intriguing questions about the history of these representa-
3 tions. When did the unintelligibility of Toraja ritual speech start to be-
4 come an issue? Did people always worry about it? Or was the importance
5 of unintelligibility linked to the introduction and widespread use of the
6 Indonesian national language? The whole notion of indirectness and un-
7 intelligibility is itself something of a recent historical construction, how-
8 ever, since in many parts of eastern Indonesia, including the Toraja high-
9 lands, ritual speech had been regarded (in the past) as the direct (not
10 indirect!) embodiment of ancestral truths.

11 Donzelli reports a common folk theory that explains unintelligibility of
12 Toraja ritual speech in terms of the lack of a writing system. Lacking a
13 writing system, the Toraja local language and its ritual speech register
14 are felt to be missing a material means for holding its meanings constant
15 and thus rendering them intelligible. The success of the Indonesian lan-
16 guage is thus often explained in terms of its writing system. It is also
17 worth noting, however, that this deficiency was also a common but indi-
18 rect way of saying that traditional religious practices were deficient: only
19 religions with scriptural orthodoxies were considered legitimate refuges
20 from the perceived communist scourge during the cold war 1960s—Islam,
21 Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism.

22 Yoonhee Kang's paper, 'Unintelligibility and imaginative interpreta-
23 tion in a Petalangan healing ritual', problematizes the whole notion of
24 intelligibility in some particularly interesting ways. She starts out with a
25 wonderfully concise statement of the problem—most treatments of ritual
26 speech studies have assumed that because the semantico-referential chan-
27 nel appears to be closed off in ritual speech for most people anyway, ritual
28 speech must really be about pragmatic functions—hence Malinowski's
29 'coefficient of weirdness', etc.

30 In fact, she says, unintelligibility comes from the performance: the use
31 of unintelligible vocables does not necessarily mean that the audience im-
32 mediately moves to a pragmatic interpretation—it depends on where the
33 performer is in the performance.

34 I was curious that Kang thought the first was harder to understand,
35 while the second was easier. For the reader of the article, in some ways
36 the first was easier to *read* because it stands alone as an autonomous text
37 artifact; while the second requires a lot more interpretation in terms of the
38 immediate circumstances of social and cultural context: unlike the first
39 text, it has pronouns, directives, questions, interjections, etc., that are
40 *only* comprehensible in its immediate context. For a reader, the first was
41 readily decodable as a text artifact because of the heavy use of internal
42 parallelism in both sound and meaning.

1 However, for the audience of Petalangan, it seems clear that for es-
 2 tablishing the intelligibility of an utterance, indexical meaning trumps
 3 semantico-referential meanings; the immediacy of the rattles, gestures, in-
 4 dexical pronouns, directives maps onto their own standards for compre-
 5 hensibility more readily than the first text. I think this paper wonderfully
 6 exposes the oversimplification of the semantic versus pragmatic contrast.
 7 This paper makes clear that there is also another axis at work: that of re-
 8 lative degrees of arbitrariness of the sign: for example, the relative degree
 9 to which comprehensibility relies on features of the immediate circum-
 10 stances of performance versus conventional, pre-established but relatively
 11 arbitrary meanings.

12 Jacobs' paper, "'Unintelligibles" in vocal performances at Middle
 13 Eastern marriage celebrations', is the only one in which unintelligibility
 14 is not so much about constructing a spiritual Other, but about positioning
 15 oneself in gendered terms. The *zagārīt* and */aa-wi-haa/* seem to function
 16 like discourse markers (Gumperz 1982; Schiffrin 1987). I think Jacobs' in-
 17 tuition that unintelligibles function something like discourse markers, or
 18 Gumperz's (1982) 'contextualization cues', is probably right. One of the
 19 nice things about this approach is that it permits one the capacity to ver-
 20 ify one's intuitions with reference to the transcription: one can examine
 21 the sequence of events and see whether or not the 'cue' did in fact result
 22 in the 'transformativity' (as she puts it) that one might expect.

23 One of the intriguing issues raised in her paper has to do with graphic
 24 representations of unintelligibility. In Jacobs' paper, unintelligible dis-
 25 course is something erased altogether. She says that *m-ha-ha*—a sort
 26 of tribute performed at marriages—is often transcribed without the
 27 unintelligibles—something that doubly suggests their status as discourse
 28 markers. One is reminded here of Silverstein's (2001) work on the limits
 29 of awareness, my own work on the selective omission by transcribers of
 30 the deictics and other metadiscursive particles from Weyewa ritual speech
 31 transcriptions (Kuipers 1990), and Urban's (1996) discussion about the se-
 32 lective omission of metadiscursive particles in Shokleng myths. In terms of
 33 contingency, it would be interesting to see what happens in cases in which
 34 the *m-ha-ha* is inadvertently left out in either graphics or performance.

35 Perrino, in 'Unintelligibility as discourse accessibility in a Senegalese
 36 ethnomedical encounter', suggests a re-framing of the whole notion of 'in-
 37 telligibility' in terms of 'accessibility'. This metaphor spatializes intelli-
 38 gibility in some useful ways and calls attention to the ways in which intelli-
 39 gibility is a means of entry and approach (as well as exit and egress) to
 40 social relationships. This metaphor of *access* is particularly useful when
 41 thinking about intelligibility in the context of performances in which par-
 42 ticipants are *spatially co-present*, as in the case of Senegalese medical

1 ethnomedical encounters. Perrino distinguishes two kinds of access: one
2 between the patient and the healer's knowledge and the other between
3 the patient and the healing power of the spirits. In this largely Muslim re-
4 gion, the local healers typically know more Arabic and verses from the
5 Hadith than the patients, for whom this religious register is relatively
6 opaque. He selectively and interpretively unpacks various obscure relevant
7 Arabic phrases. Through verbal regulation of degrees of accessibility, the
8 healer marks off 'phases' or episodes in the unfolding event, organizes the
9 relations in the emergent participant structure, and thus creates a multi-
10 modal story through which the healing event is experienced. Perrino's
11 analysis suggests the importance of 'performance' as an analytical frame-
12 work for the interpretation of unintelligibility.

13 Kristina Wirtz, in 'Making sense of unintelligible messages in divine
14 communication', shows the remarkable collusion among Santería per-
15 formers as they interactively construct certain utterances as unintelligible.
16 The performer Ochun, for instance, used *lucumi* 'ritual register' and *bozal*
17 'slave register' that were framed as unintelligible through gestures, hedges.
18 In response, one of the listeners, Maura, by providing Ochun's utterances
19 with a 'gloss', not only renders them intelligible, but thereby implies that
20 her utterances were originally *unintelligible* (otherwise, why would it have
21 needed a metasemantic gloss?). The fact that another audience member,
22 Alberto, focused silently on Maura's translations and interpretations, im-
23 plies that the utterances must indeed have been unintelligible (because,
24 after all, he required a third person to make sense of them). There is an
25 almost conspiratorial complicity among the participants as they seam-
26 lessly weave together an image of unintelligibility.

27 Michael Lempert's paper, 'How to make our subjects clear: Denota-
28 tional transparency and subject formation in the Tibetan diaspora' con-
29 trasts an indirect, theatrical, and dissimulating form of 'public reprimand'
30 (*tshogs gtam*) with a more direct, sincere, and modernist variety of public
31 counseling. As with the other papers, Lempert's analysis shows how the
32 deployment of this distinctive genre in different ways results in divergent
33 constructions of the subjectivity of the derelict monks. Projecting this
34 contrast onto Malinowski's analysis of coefficients of 'weirdness' and
35 intelligibility in Trobriand ritual speech, he argues that both cases de-
36 pend on a language ideology valuing clarity, directness, and denotational
37 transparency.

38 With admirable clarity, these papers provoke important comparative
39 questions about the historical, cross-cultural, and technical features of rit-
40 ualized nonsense. How is unintelligible nonsense historically constructed?
41 Under what circumstances does it become a category and provided with a
42 distinct label? Under what conditions is it desacralized and aestheticized

1 (as in Victorian children's literature)? Under what historical circumstances
 2 does it become spiritually privileged, even authoritative (as in glossola-
 3 lia)? Under what sorts of conditions does ritually unintelligible discourse
 4 get culturally bracketed as a 'performance', a distinctive genre requiring
 5 mastery, control, and specialized responsibility? What are the technical
 6 linguistic features by which these performances are accomplished? What
 7 happens when rules of constructing unintelligibility are violated?

8 Taken together, these papers, I think it is fair to say, have taken us a
 9 step further into worlds of nonsense. Is that really so bad? Insisting on
 10 complete transparency and clear meanings does not promote the appreci-
 11 ation of the historical and contextual specificity of culturally defined
 12 forms of unintelligibility. With these examples in mind, one could argue
 13 that a more pluralistic world involves recognition of *more* nonsense, not
 14 less.

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8 This research eventually resulted in the publication of *Power in Performance: The Creation*
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11 came to supplant ritual speech as the language of religious and political authority. In *Lang-*
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