

Voice and Difference



A Virtual Special Issue edited by Shiv Ganesh and Heidi Rose

Voice is a quintessentially communicative phenomenon, and communication scholarship has engaged with it for decades. The pages of NCA's journals in particular have been especially influential forums for the production of scholarship on voice. We observe, not surprisingly, that early studies of voice published in such journals as *Quarterly Journal of Speech* or *Communication Monographs* understood voice literally, in terms of verbal production, intonation, pitch, rate, and so forth. Over time scholarly treatment of voice became, of course, vastly more abstracted, and the concept extended from its nucleus in speech and performance to its current location as a central communication problematic in large, complex societies struggling with issues of power, discrimination, cultural diversity and material inequity.

As a major communication trope, voice has been positioned with regard to a diverse array of topics and issues in NCA's journals, both explicitly and implicitly. For instance, scholars have dialectically positioned voice and silence (Clair, 1993). Others have interpreted it in terms of cultural problematics, especially as regards representation, postcolonialism and the impossibility of subaltern authenticity (Shome & Hegde, 2002). Still others have considered voice as it is co-constructed in processes of dialogue (Witteborn, 2011). And so, it is impossible, and perhaps undesirable, to develop a canonical and representative list of scholarship on voice. For this reason, we have chosen to focus this virtual special issue on contemporary treatments of voice in the context of scholarship on difference. Further, we have chosen these five articles in this virtual special issue not because they are singularly representative of all scholarship on either voice or difference or both, but because they are thematically illustrative and intellectually provocative, and together, they continue to question any kind of essential unity upon which the concept of voice is itself built.

The first two articles bring a critical perspective to our disciplinary foundation in rhetoric and speech performance. Eric King Watts (2001) traces various and ambiguous ways in which "voice" has been conceptualized in rhetorical studies in recent years. Focusing specifically on certain unacknowledged differences between parole (speaking) and langue (language), Watts asserts that rhetoric scholars have problematically isolated both the embodied, personal qualities of voice as speaking subject (the agentic qualities) and voice as textual, the linguistic system that speaks the subject. Arguing that "'voice' is not detachable from a body (singular or collective)" (p. 192), Watts offers a place for the study of voice in rhetoric that removes distinction between speaking and language, highlighting the quality of voice as an "ethical and emotional occurrence" (p. 192) that is situated in community.

"Voice" and "Voicelessness" in Rhetorical Studies

E. K. Watts

Quarterly Journal of Speech

Conquergood's (2000) essay revisits the 19th century American elocution movement as a site of both oppression and resistance for all those who did not conform to dominant norms of middle and upper-middle class white voices and bodies. Conquergood argues that the dominant language system and systems of parole like elocution went beyond ignoring or denying difference; the teaching and practice of elocution intentionally removed particular voices and bodies from the public sphere. The very principles, rules, and practices of elocution reveal systems of power and exclusion.

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Using a number of historical documents, Conquergood demonstrates concrete ways in which black slaves appropriated elocution and used it to resist and subvert larger structures of power. Both Watts (2001) and Conquergood (2000) thus invest the study of speech with the critical-cultural perspective that marks contemporary scholarship, demonstrating why “voice” matters in the relationship between speaking subject, discourse, and community.

Rethinking Elocution: The Trope of the Talking Book and Other Figures of Speech

D. Conquergood

Text and Performance Quarterly

The next two essays understand voice in applied contexts, highlighting its pragmatic utility in studies of difference. Meares et al’s (2004) study helps illustrate how voice is always negotiated in practice in terms of privilege, and how dominant discursive practices serve to render minority voices mute. It carefully traces ways in which members in a culturally diverse organization negotiated voice in attempting to deal with their own mistreatment. In the process, it identifies how organizational ambiguity about appropriate policy and practice regarding mistreatment itself served to mute employee voices, evoking a range of reactions, from anger and surprise to withdrawal and shock. It also examines the process of “re-voicing,” exploring the arduous process whereby members who were initially silenced were able to consolidate and again voice issues regarding mistreatment and discrimination. As such, the article provides not only a lucid synthesis of theoretical work on voice and mistreatment, but also an excellent illustration of how voice, justice, cultural difference and diversity are intertwined in practice.

Employee Mistreatment and Muted Voices in the Culturally Diverse Workplace

M. Meares, J. Oetzel, A. Torres, D. Derkacs, and T. Ginossar

Journal of Applied Communication Research

Sarah Dempsey’s (2007) article imaginatively introduces the notion of “bounded voice” as a tactic for negotiating competing organizational demands for accountability. The article illuminates how large transnational organizational differences—in the context of governance relationships between funding agencies and social change organizations in developing countries—combine to produce accountability as a tension-laden issue. Dempsey’s identification of bounded voice as a key governing tactic helps illustrate how which members of funding groups enable the expression of stakeholder voices in strategically appropriate ways, ensuring expression in the correct forum, using appropriate language, and at the appropriate time. It is a useful reminder of how the problematic of voice and representation are amplified significantly in diverse transnational contexts.

Negotiating Accountability Within International Contexts: The Role of Bounded Voice

S. Dempsey

Communication Monographs

The last essay, by John Warren (2008), is perhaps the most implicit treatment of voice, but also the most explicit treatment of difference. Warren’s piece brings together a range of perspectives, relying heavily on Deleuze, to animate the idea that “difference... is bred through minute everyday performance” (p. 295). Warren’s work understands the connections between voice and difference in at least two domains. The first has to do with context, and the second with difference. The “calling out” and voicing of specific differences is immediately drawn into and rendered sensible in terms of a cultural scene.

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Simultaneously, however, Warren draws on Deleuzian ideas about the constitution of a fluid ontology through the repetition of difference, to argue that every repetitive speech event itself is itself unique and accordingly constitutes difference.

Performing Difference: Repetition in Context

J. Warren

Journal of International and Intercultural Communication

In one way or another, all the articles included in this virtual special issue highlight voice as a way to claim identity, as a way to hear and be heard, and as a relational and community-driven phenomenon. As such this scholarship on voice and difference also highlights how irrevocably infused the notion of voice is with ethics. These articles wrestle with fundamental ethical issues ranging from representation to accountability, and to the notion of difference itself. Taken together, one cannot help but be optimistic about the potential of both these crucial constructs to illuminate discourses of difference and we believe that the journals produced by this Association will continue to lead the way in producing such scholarship.

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