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Research article

Hearing the voice of God: Towards a semiotic understanding of prayer

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Abstract

This article brings together two unrelated ethnographies in which former hostages of the FARC held in the Colombian rainforest and traditionalist Russian Orthodox Christians both claim to have heard the voice of God. Through analyzing the subjective assumptions made about intentionality and voice agency by these two sets of listeners, an attempt is made to understand what might be the circumstances that lead one to believe he or she has heard a "divine" voice. For the Catholic Colombian captives who recycled what they took to be prophetic radio voices and for Russian Orthodox Christians who believed God was speaking through the priest when they heard the liturgical language (Church Slavonic), the voice was embodied in an unfamiliar way. It was the combination of this and various synesthetic factors that made the voice appear to them as a manifestation of divine power. The coupling of words with voice had been misaligned leading to a muddling of intentionality and semiotic ambiguity vis-à-vis the voice and mimetic responses to it. Building on ethnographic research with white Christians in America who were on a quest for intuitively non-self-generated thoughts, this research shows that inner voices can be used to invoke linguistic representations of God in the absence of any training. Moreover, these two pieces of fieldwork demonstrate how much there is to learn by examining the subjectivity and dialogicality of voice when external and internal socialities are juxtaposed, and when different semiotic ideologies of voice come into contact.

KEYWORDS: prayer, voice, semiosis, intentionality, anthropology of prayer, radio

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to examine the circumstances under which semiotic codes relating to subjective interpretations of an apparent divine voice can be *rewired*. That is to say, listeners who believed they heard the voice of God perceived something akin to a decentering of intentionality. In doing so, I intend to explore the ideological constitution of voice (Weidman, 2014, p. 37-51). I will analyze how hostages of the FARC (a left-wing guerrilla group that has been in conflict for more than five decades with the Colombian armed forces and various paramilitary organizations) and Russian Orthodox worshippers in the Moscow area imagined (and reimagined) the agency of certain voices—where agency is understood as the ability to bring about effects and "(re)constitute the world" (Karp, 1986, p. 137).[1] In order to do this, I will need to invoke notions of intentionality in the sense the term is used in the linguistic-anthropological literature, semiosis and experiential listening (Eidsheim, 2009; Friedman, 2005; Duranti, 2015). Semiotics is relevant to this discussion of hearing the voice of God for the simple reason that I am concerned with perceptions regarding what is being communicated by who to whom, and how. However, I will not be plotting the intellectual genealogy of semiotic anthropology.[2] Through complex accumulations of signs, listeners make subjective assumptions about intentionality and so subjectivity is approached here as a semiotic construct. My two unrelated ethnographies are embedded in quite different soundscapes, but what unites these two ethnographies is the fact that members of both groups claimed to hear the voice of God.

The title of the article does not refer to "hearing the voice of God" in one's inner voice, nor does it relate to any biblical sense of obeying a command. My concern is solely with hearing an *external* voice that one believes (perhaps through a process of elimination) to be God's. Research of this kind is normally coupled with Pentecostalism or some kind of evangelical religious practice (and not Orthodoxy) (Robbins, 2010; Luhrmann, 2007; Coleman, 2011; Lindhardt, 2011) where hallucinatory experience is more common, and where there is a focus on fostering communication with the divine. One might think that Catholics (the hostages that reported to have heard the voice of God were all Catholics)

1 I would like to thank the British Academy for funding my research in Colombia. I extend a very big "thank you" to all the kind, brave people I worked with in Colombia and especially to Herbin Hoyos, who was responsible for setting up and running *Voces del Secuestro* radio show over a period of more than 20 years. His work is truly inspirational. I should also like to thank all the people I have worked with in Moscow. An earlier draft of this paper was presented at the anthropology seminar (kruzhok) of the Higher School of Economics in St Petersburg. I am very grateful for all the useful feedback from that seminar. Profs. Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov, David Parkin and Marklen Konurbaev all read earlier drafts of the paper. I would like to thank them for their comments. Any remaining errors are my own.

2 A brief history of semiotic anthropology can be found in Mertz (2007).

and Orthodox Christians are more likely to claim to hear the voices of saints or angels than God himself. Some of my Russian interlocutors spoke of how they developed long-term relationships with certain icons portraying saints. These worshippers often said that icons would give advice and that these words were relayed to them through the worshipper's internal or inner voice, but none of my interlocutors felt that a saint or icon depicting a saint responded to them in what was definitively an external voice. It is hoped that this article will bring some much-needed fresh perspectives on these agentive aspects of communicative religious experience.

Mention is made in this article of speech acts. While I do not focus specifically on speech acts, this article is written in the spirit of Duranti's (1993) critique of Searlian speech acts, which tend to be directed towards individual intentions. Even if the speech acts I refer to may seem to navigate towards individual intentions, their derived meaning can only really be understood in the context of the social world in which they are uttered. I am not here concerned with assessing the truth-values of propositions as is so often the case in the formal semantics literature. I hope instead that my ethnographic insights might contribute to showing how formal semantics could be expanded significantly to incorporate the finer nuances of cultural pragmatics.

Pragmatics aside, this research is important as there are so few contributions to the anthropological literature regarding non-evangelical Christians *hearing* the voice of God.[3] However, my main contribution is a methodological one: I am adding the dimension of semiosis to discussions of voice agency (the ability of voice as a sign to bring about perceptual change at a specific place and time), intentionality and performative listening. This study also complements existing research on "hearing the voice of God" ethnographies (Luhrmann, 2012; Csordas, 1997) and "sensory ethnography" (Luehrmann, 2018).

In this article, I do not wish to attempt to rationalize superhuman communication experiences. In the case of the small number of Russian Orthodox Christians who believed liturgical language choice (Church Slavonic is the liturgical language—a language related to, but quite distinct from Russian) could be a conduit to a superhuman auditory phenomenon, it might be noted that these events typically occurred during the Divine Liturgy, and fasting had taken place previously.[4] It is known that fasting practices can

[3] Haeri (2013, p. 5-34) explains how Iranian women achieve an "intimacy with God" and even a "co-presence with God", but no reference is made to them hearing the voice of God.

[4] Church Slavonic should be distinguished from Old Church Slavonic with which it is often conflated. Studied by philologists, Old Church Slavonic refers to the literary language of a limited corpus of texts. Church Slavonic emerged out of Old Church Slavonic but has been influenced by local vernaculars. It is an ecclesiastical language that can function as a supranational linguistic medium (Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Serbia, etc.).

result in altered states of consciousness (Walsh & Vaughan, 1993). It is not impossible that sleep loss and poor nutrition could have also explained why Colombian hostages had these experiences, but when asked about this neither group readily attributed these spiritual happenings to such factors. Let's now take a closer look at these ethnographic encounters.

Ethnographic surprises: A snapshot of the two field sites

As Mauss (2003) noted, prayer—supplication of and communication with the divine; a communicative silence if you like—has retained its centrality in religious practice whereas most other rites tend to regress as a religion develops. Fasting, for instance, is still practiced amongst some Russian Orthodox Christians, but by a relatively small minority. Anthropology has typically focused on prayer as a collective practice of communicating with God and overlooked the admittedly limited ethnographic material we have regarding how individual worshippers actually hear the voice of God.

Both sets of accounts of hearing the voice of God came to me as ethnographic surprises for I did not set out to research communication with God. In Colombia, I was analyzing the impact of one-way radio messages sent to people being held captive in the rainforest; subsequently, in Russia, I was researching Orthodox worshippers' semiotic relationship to the liturgical language. On both occasions, these were incidental throw-away comments made by interlocutors told in the form of a narrative relating to tangential matters. I had no inkling that any talk of hearing the voice of God was forthcoming.

Amongst the FARC hostages, social memory often comprised the memory of a certain radio voice (and not much else). The hostages were typically given a radio when taken captive. This made the life of the prison guard easier and often prevented the prisoner from trying to commit suicide. The captives seldom had access to written literature (some were given a Bible, but it was often taken away as a form of punishment) and so voices during the night on the radio loomed large in their acoustic memory (Leonard, 2019). Prisoners' recollections of living in isolation in the rainforest (often kept in cages) were largely acoustic. Many former hostages spoke of the visual monotony of the rainforest ("everything was brown" as one former prisoner put it), and how this monotony resulted in what I perceived to be "synesthetic spillings" (Connor, 2004, p. 153), which are discussed subsequently. The conditions in which the captives were held undoubtedly facilitated such re-imaginings of voice.

The Colombian radio program, *Voces del Secuestro*, which was set up in the 1990s as an aid to both hostages and their families transmitted over 300,000 messages to kidnapping victims. These messages were broadcast every Saturday during the night when reception in the Colombian rainforest is best and were typically two minutes long. Families of those in captivity the longest were given priority to talk, and all those leaving messages received some training on how to sound positive and upbeat (not an easy task for most families). The explicit purpose of the program was to bring hope to those people held captive. The vast majority of captives had no means of responding to the radio messages. A few well-known politicians that had been taken captive were allowed once a year to leave video messages where invariably they mentioned the mensajes (messages) and what a powerful and positive impact they had on their spirit and mood. It was common for prisoners to describe them as their "única fuente de Esperanza" ("only source of hope") and say repeatedly "los mensajes fueron una bendición" ("the messages were a blessing"). Most of the hostages were held in groups, but mayors, senators and senior officials of the Colombian Army (and sometimes businessmen) were kept in isolation. Some of the captives I became acquainted with were held by the FARC and other terrorist splinter groups such as the ELN for ten years or more.

As the messages were so short and, given the circumstances of the hostages' captivity, were on the whole rather formulaic in nature. Many of the hostages I interviewed said they felt abandoned by God, and the families of their captives wished to remind them in their messages that God was thinking of them. Thus, these radio messages are often characterized by prayer-like optative statements such as "Que Dios te bendiga" ("May God bless you"); "Que Dios te mantenga a salvo" ("May God keep you safe"); "Que Dios escuche este mensaje y te ayude" ("May God hear this message and help you"). It was, I believe, the prayer-like features of these radio messages that led some of the captives to pray immediately after having listened to them. Prayer felt like a natural continuation of the messages; it was sometimes an attempt to materialize the reverberating optative speech acts that the captive had internalized. Sitting alone in the dark rainforest in the middle of the night, these voices—typically, their only contact with the outside world—were magnified and given extra-lingual meaning.

Indeed, a small number of these captives recycled the prophetic radio voice in a dialogic interaction (Bakhtin, 1981) with prayer in their inner speech, and this resulted in what

they believed to be the voice of God.[5] The capacity for interior dialogue derives from prior experience with exterior dialogue (Du Bois, 2011). Inner speech was not then a product of disembodied silence but a result of echoic mimicry of radio voices. By assigning these voices new identities, the hostages were—through a process of performative listening—"doing things" with voices in the Austinian sense (Eidsheim, 2009; Austin, 1962). God's presence had been cultivated through the sensorial impact and interiorization of the radio voice. The captives' "desire to hear and understand"—what de Certeau (1988, p. 137) called *vouloir-entendre*—was apparently heightened under certain circumstances. With the echoic mimicry of radio voices, these experiences bring into question the relationship between mimesis and semiosis for the "voice was a presence in the signifier" (de Certeau, 1988, p. 137): the words of the messages (from God) were mimetic of the radio messages, but the voice was different.[6]

The subsequent field site in Moscow turned out to be a corollary to this. For the Russian Orthodox worshipper, the belief that they were hearing the voice of God was coupled though strictly with language choice.[7] They only ever believed they heard the voice of God when they heard the priest chant the Church Slavonic language, the idiom of the Divine Liturgy. This context was of course quite different from the Colombian fieldwork for the speaker (the priest) was present. The relevant factor here was the sensory impact of the voice speaking the Church Slavonic language through the priest as a conduit. These worshippers subscribed to a semiotic ideology by which I mean they perceived the semiotic status of the liturgical language as used in church to be such that they could only come closer to God through the holy language (Church Slavonic) (Keane, 2018; Leonard, 2020a). However, this semiotic ideology is not shared by all worshippers. Those who welcome the reform of the liturgical language do not perceive it to be embodied and do not think it becomes the language of God through its vocalization and enactment.[8] They believe that Church Slavonic is not an indelible part of Russian Orthodox life and that the relation to the world it represents is an arbitrary one. A language

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[5] One might note that in the case of the Colombian hostages, the voices were only heard in the middle of the night after listening to the radio messages. It is not uncommon to hear a voice when falling asleep—a form of hypnagogic hallucination (Cook, 2013). However, the hostages were adamant in denying that they were hallucinatory at the time of hearing the voice.

[6] One is reminded of Haeri's (2013) research on the performance of prayer in Iran with his interlocutors saying things like: "I cannot perform the morning [dawn] prayer without hearing my father's voice".

[7] See Barthes (1977) on the encounter between a language and a voice and Leonard (2016) for a discussion of "high-intimacy" languages.

[8] Readings from the Old Testament as well as from the Acts and Epistles of the Apostles which are part of the New Testament can now be in Russian. The same applies for readings from the Gospel and for the reading of the entire text of the Four Gospels during Holy Week.

can then have different modes of signification, and these can have implications for the interiority of speakers (Keane, 1997b). Adherents to such "a sacred language ideology" resist liturgical language reform as for them the relationship between "sacred" words and their meanings is primordially defined and therefore cannot be recalibrated.

Therefore, the words of the Divine Liturgy heard through the voice of the priest were familiar, but the voice was embodied in an unfamiliar way. Interlocutors in both Colombia and Russia felt as if there had been something akin to a semiotic rewiring brought about through these resonances; a decentering of intentionality. It was this "embodied otherness" that made the voice a manifestation of divine power (Csordas, 1997, p. 240), but that also grounded the existential otherness of language. Neither the hostages nor the Russian worshippers spoke explicitly of "embodiment" or "intentionality," but were inclined to make comments along the following lines:

Colombian hostage (Jose):

> Una voz estaba hablando a través de mí. Esta voz estaba muy tranquila. Al principio, pensé que era una voz de uno de los mensajes de radio. Pero luego supe que venía de otra parte. La voz era tranquilizadora, pero poderosa. Esta voz estaba dentro de mí, pero el sonido era externo. No me lo estaba imaginando. Y luego se fue. Después, estaba tranquilo. Al día siguiente, me sentí confiado. Traté de recordar las palabras, pero se habían ido. Sin embargo, la suave voz hizo eco en mi mente y en mi cuerpo.
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> A voice was speaking through me. This voice was very calm. At first, I thought it was a voice from one of the radio messages. But then I knew it was coming from somewhere else. The voice was soothing, but powerful. This voice was inside of me, but the sound was external. I was not imagining it. And then it went. Afterwards, I was calm. The next day, I felt confident. I tried to remember the words, but they were gone. However, the soft voice echoed in my mind and body.

Russian Orthodox worshipper (Tatiana):

> Когда я слышу, как священник поет во время Божественной литургии на церковнославянском языке, то я ощущаю голос Бога. Я слышу Его голос. Это было похоже на поток, проходящий сквозь меня. Я не понимаю каждого слова, но в этом как раз и заключается смысл - Бог говорит со мной через священника. Если бы Он говорил со мной по-русски, я была бы удивлена. Не думаю, что это было бы истинное восприятие.

> When I hear the priest chant the Divine Liturgy in Church Slavonic, I hear the voice of God. It is his voice that I hear. It is like a river flowing through me. I do not understand every word, but I think that is the point. God is speaking to me through the priest. If he were speaking Russian to me, I would be surprised. I don't think it would seem right.

These ethnographies of speech events demonstrate how belief can stimulate complex cognitive processes. Both of these pieces of fieldwork showed how God appeared as a vocal and apparently veridical presence, but nothing more than that. It was just a reimagined voice, channeled through another voice—either the priest speaking the liturgical language or the inner voice of the hostage after hearing petitionary-like messages from loved ones on the radio. All of the Colombian prisoners I worked with spoke of how during their captivity they were aware of what might be called the inner voice of consciousness, its constancy and continuity. Emotional reactions, hope, feelings of despair and hopelessness, moral choices and pain all found their speaking parts in this interior conversation.

Although many prisoners spoke of the reverberating inner voice, it would be wrong to assume the hostages and indeed the parishioners made for a monolithic group. It was only the more traditionalist Russian Orthodox interlocutors that I worked with that believed the Church Slavonic language encodes divinity and efficacious ritual practice. Many of the traditionalists that I worked with held deeply essentialist views regarding the ideological status of the liturgical language. They believed that if you changed the language of worship, you changed the spirituality of the people.[9] Discussions with them reminded me that all kinds of questions relating to religious legitimacy revolve around code choice, and semiotic interpretations of this code choice. In this respect, one thinks of the diglossic Arab world where Classical Arabic must be used as the language of prayer. In part, it is the idiom choice that renders the prayer an act of communication with God (Haeri, 2003, 2013).

The semiotic materiality of the voice

A voice is not just the means of creating sound in performance but has material and spatial dimensions. The voice is agentive and multi-faceted. I wish here to gain a better understanding of what the circumstances were that made a listener believe he or she was hearing the voice of God. The first observation to be made is that certain worshippers'

[9] Cf. Shargunov, 2008; Kaverin, 2008. Note that there is something Charismatic about the Orthodox traditionalist claim that the vernacular language is "inadequate for communication with the divine" (Csordas, 1997, p. 238).

and radio listeners' interiorities appear to have been formed by the premeditated, formulaic language of prayer. It would seem it was in part the formulaic language of the radio messages—"todos los rehenes están en nuestros pensamientos y oraciones" ("all the hostages are in our thoughts and prayers"); "sé fuerte, no pierdas la esperanza" ("be strong, do not give up hope")—and the formulaic refrains of the Divine Liturgy (as well as idiom choice), which led them to believe they were hearing the voice of God. Thus, these two discourses share surprisingly a great deal. With the Russian example, for the worshippers who were rooted in past traditions and surrounded by the immediate symbolism of the relics, the voices seemed to transcend time and the world: immutable and indifferent to temporal necessities. However, the hostages spoke of the impact of the voice in similar ways: "Esta voz. Estaba entrando y saliendo de mi mente" ("That voice. It was drifting in and out of my mind").

Some of the Catholic hostages were also apparently conditioned to think that the repetitive language of the radio messages had a liturgical (or at least petitionary) feel and that this was in addition to the desperate circumstances of their captivity conducive to conjuring up notions of the divine voice:

> Para mí, fue como si estos mensajes vinieran de Dios. Los escuchaba en medio de la noche. Miré al cielo y esperé y esperé una voz que reconocí para llamar mi nombre. Me sentaba y rezaba. Si la voz de la radio mencionaba mi nombre, me sentía bendecido. Dios había escuchado mi oración
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> For me, it was as if these messages came from God. I would listen to them in the middle of the night. I looked up at the heavens and waited and waited for a voice I recognized to call my name. I would sit and pray. If the radio voice mentioned my name, I felt blessed. God had heard my prayer

Creating this kind of interiority or dialogue within one's inner consciousness was a different kind of affair for the Orthodox worshippers. For the Russian Orthodox traditionalist, there may be hierarchies of sacredness with the Divine Liturgy in Church Slavonic at the top for this language may be perceived to help worshippers "build (the right) interiority" (Haeri, 2017).[10] The traditionalist may perceive a semiotic disconnect when parts of the service are given in Russian (which it is now permitted to do following recent reforms) for once again there is a misalignment between the *form* of the utterances and the worshippers' semiotic, normative expectation of such events. By "semiotic disconnect," I specifically mean the social expectation regarding the coupling of words with

[10] I take traditionalists to refer to those worshippers who strongly oppose the reform of the liturgical language.

a specific voice is misaligned with the hearer's interpretation. Traditionalists tend to invoke folk understandings of semiotic praxis where they perceive the Holy language as an icon or experiential portal that makes the presence of God more pre-supposable.

The switch to the sacred language could therefore potentially restructure relations between the "speech event and an other world" (Keane, 1997a, p. 60). The priest is visible to the worshippers, but the words of his language belong to the sacred domain hidden behind the iconostasis and thus for some may *feel* like a command from God (the authority and agency of the voice is heightened further if the priest cannot be seen for the listener is more inclined to ponder the source of the words, which once again creates a parallel with the Colombian ethnography). In this liturgical context, semantic intelligibility appears to be of secondary importance.

It is reasonable to ask then how do we unbundle the materiality of the voice, particularly when the speaker cannot be seen (as in the Colombian case)? The nature of voice-hearing has a long, variegated history, and here is not the place to delve into it. Hearing what people perceive to be the voice of God involves, of course, a taxonomy of possibilities, one being that they are mistaken in their belief. Having worked closely with my interlocutors over extended periods of time, I have no reason to believe that their claims of hearing the voice of God should be held to be ipso facto pathological, mere fabrications of the mind or metaphorized experiences through a convergence of events that appear to have divine significance. The belief in the superhuman origin of their experiences was in both cases unshakable, and there is no evidence that they suffered from psychological disorders. It is clear though that words, images, and sounds can combine in synesthetic ways to provide some kind of (un)codified meaning. In the case of the Colombian example at least, this was a case of Connor's paradoxical principle: "the more we concentrate upon one sense ... the more likely it is that synaesthetic spillings and minglings may occur" (2004, p. 153). This spill-over principle echoed in a number of my interviews in which captives explained how the radio voice was both remembered and experienced: "Estaba tan oscuro en la jungla por la noche. Solo estábamos la voz de la radio y yo. Después de los mensajes diría mis oraciones y esta voz estaría viva en mí." ("It was so dark in the jungle at night. There was just the radio voice and me. After the messages, I would say my prayers and this voice would be alive in me.")

Similarly, as something partly musical and partly verbal, chanting (the Orthodox Divine Liturgy is always chanted) seems also to be particularly conducive to synesthetic effects for it is expressive and mimetic. At the risk of over-romanticizing, when one hears the iconic *basso profondo* voice during the service it is easy to see how one could feel the

depths of the Russian soul and even conjure up images of distant ancestors singing with primordial voices. Chanting is also semiotically ambiguous because the link between sound and meaning is blurred for the less well "прихожанин" ("churched") parishioner at least. Chanting sits perhaps somewhere in the middle of the symbolic and semiotic axis to which Kristeva (1980) liked to appeal. Its performative charge lies surely in this ambiguity and in-betweenness: this heavenly-like whispering gives the impression that it could be attributed to any number of liminal agents.

None of these experiences (as reported) amounted to a conversation with a superhuman agent. It was a voice that left a "tingling feeling": the product in their view of a refined sensual imagination (and in the case of the hostages' auditory imagination) provoked by either the circumstances of captivity and prayer (Colombian hostage) or just prayer (Russian Orthodox Christians). For the hostages, there was nothing to "crowd out self-generated imagery" (Boyer, 2013). For the Colombian Catholics held in the rainforest who were used to highly institutionalized forms of religiosity, hearing the voice of God was an unexpected and profound spiritual experience. Their Catholicism is relevant because their notion of a Catholic God was grounded in notions of hierarchy, and hierarchy is surely relevant in distinguishing God in a multiplicity of inner voices and radio voices. Where these prisoners are concerned, being Catholic primarily meant an indexing of personal faith and proximity to the Divine, which was brought about through invoking the passion of Christ, the Virgin Mary, and various saints.

As Appadurai (1988) reminds us, the problem with voice is its multiplicity as well as its representation. The Colombian hostages may have believed they heard the voice of God, but behind that voice was a whole discography of intermingled voices who left messages on the radio (as well as of course the rich soundscape of the rainforest). Appadurai was concerned with the Bakhtinian-like multi-voicedness of the ethnographer; however, in my ethnography, the multiplicity and lamination of voice on the threshold of the outer and inner world of human perception applied instead to the interlocutor. I think it is important to emphasize that for both sets of interlocutors, this auditory experience of God was something personal. It was never an encounter with some impersonal life force. This experience was not considered to be something "supernatural" but was instead indicative of a higher level of spiritual awareness that was fully within the boundaries of Christianity.

Neither set of interlocutors could remember the words of the voice; representation had moved from communication to the sensory. God's presence had been cultivated through the sensorial impact of the radio voice. This kind of divine speech was not so much a

representation of thought, but more akin to the Merleau-Pontian (1962) verbal gesture imbued with immanent meaning. For the Russian Orthodox Christians who were well versed in the language of the Divine Liturgy (it was only these that claimed to hear the voice of God), the effect of the divine voice was first and foremost a sense of auditory calm—in a way a kind of semiotic disconnect, a voice without words but a phenomenological reality, nonetheless. The words are uttered, but the instrumentality of the voice resulted in the words slipping from memory. This thus begs the question: can meaning reside in a voice alone? For both the hostages and the worshippers at least, the boundary between the semiotic and the representational seemed blurred.

A word or two should be said about the interlocutors' response to what they believed was the voice of God. For the Russian Orthodox Christians, there was no real sense of surprise or shock. One of them (Anna) liked to speak of how the Bible is full of visionary stories and dream experiences that stem from an altered state of consciousness, and that her experiences were in line with them. The Colombian Catholics were not necessarily shocked or surprised either, but that was more because the voice was so human-like and the subsequent feeling was one of absolute calm. One might ask then how did they know it was the voice of God? For the hostages, providing the voice was not a figment of their imagination, they could not assign any other identity to the voice for this only happened when they were alone in the rainforest in the early hours of the morning.

Where my ethnographies are concerned at least, it was first the formulaic and highly repetitive phraseology of liturgical prayer (and radio messages) that was conducive to hearing the voice of God; second, it was one might call "synesthetic spillings" that led to the perception of semiotically ambiguous voiced forms.

Intentionality and interpretations of voice agency

Contrary to the Western Cartesian ideology and its dualistic semiotic notions of listener-hearer, interpretative practices of intentionality can be relative. We go to the church service and assume that everybody is assigning the same identity to the voice, but it turns out this might not be the case. The shades of meaning attributed to the agency of voice are determined by a host of interrelated factors that concern culture, spirituality, semiotic ideologies, personhood, and social relations. Beyond the rationalist West, these factors are arguably less likely to result in a dualistic interpretation of intentionality and speech acts. In Russia at least, worshippers more readily embrace what some Westerners may consider 'supernatural events': one thinks of communicative relationships with icons, the transformational powers that many worshippers think certain icons are in-

hered with, the healing powers attributed to holy water, the widely held belief in the Holy Fire miracle, and similar.[11]

When thinking about the interpretation of voice and its agency, Geertz's (1973) web of significance comes to mind for the symbolic representations that lead us to interpret vocality and generate meaning that come from cultural frameworks that we have "spun" ourselves. Different cultural and religious understandings imply surely that we are not all wired to the same semiotic interpretive code: the devout Russian Orthodox Christian may perceive the voice of the priest speaking the liturgical language (Church Slavonic) to be the index of the Divine. Equally, the Catholic hostage of the FARC held in the Colombian rainforest may invoke a similar agency during prayer and after having heard the *Voces del Secuestro* radio messages. What is interesting is that both sets of interlocutors described these events as "intimate appointments with a human voice" ("una cita íntima con voz humana"; "сокровенное свидание с человеческим голосом"). This observation is interesting for two reasons: firstly, these "actors" (Goffman, 1974) operating in entirely different field sites mentioned the notion of intimacy when pondering the criteria conducive to this effect. Secondly, both sets of listeners believed they were hearing the voice of God, and yet the voice was perceived and described as entirely human.

To use Gibson's term (1986), semiotic codes create "systems of affordances": organisms interacting with elements in different ways. Just as humans need air to breathe but fish do not, certain voices, linguistic patterns, or ethnolinguistic contexts may stimulate a variety of semiotic codes depending on the listener. The semiotic code can *afford* different insights and interpretations. The normal binary one-one relationship between voice and pragmatic interpretation may be upset in certain ritualized circumstances. The formulaic, ritualized words of prayer can muddle notions of intentionality: as the congregation collectively repeats the prayers uttered by the priest who speaks the liturgical language (Church Slavonic), are the words intended for me, everybody in the church, or even the wider universe? The words may index multiple, alternative audiences at the same time: those in the congregation, people at home listening to the service on the radio, and others. Is God addressing us through the priest in the "divine language"? Is the prayer public or private? What should we conclude about the ownership of thoughts? How does the listener know the voice of God is meant for him or her? Are other listeners feeling the same sensation of serene peace? From a cross-cultural perspective and in dialogic terms, the answers to these questions soon become tangled and complicated. All these

[11] Each year on the day before Orthodox Easter, a flame miraculously appears inside the tomb of Jesus Christ in Jerusalem's Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Many Orthodox Christians believe this symbolizes the resurrection of Jesus. The holy flame does not seem to burn the skin.

questions listed above relate to intentionality and revelation: revelation is normally understood as a person-to-person affair, but if it is externally vocal then the intentionality might be rendered ambiguous.

Among the hostages, there were also a plurality of listeners: there were those for whom the Saturday night messages were their only source of hope; there were casual listeners who did not receive messages themselves—whom Goffman (1981) calls "unratified listeners" (cf. Irvine, 1996)—but were curious to identify callers and there were even listeners for whom the voice embodied a spiritual dimension. It is these doubled subjectivities that contribute to the constitution of meaning in the intersubjective dialogue of ritual performance (Csordas, 1997).

One of the principal differences between my ethnography and the findings of Tanja Luhrmann (2012) who works with white American evangelical Christians trained to hear the voice of God is that neither of my groups of interlocutors were on a quest for intuitively non-self-generated thoughts. There was no ostensible desire or training involved to hear the voice of God. It was just an auspicious and uncanny outcome of sensual/auditory and semiotic ideological factors. These factors demanded the whole of the listener's consciousness at a particular moment, but my interlocutors received no psychological training to reach this point of "whole consciousness." For the Colombian hostages that heard the voice of God, these experiences brought out a new and different order of reality, albeit an ephemeral one. For a fleeting moment, there was a divine presence in their lives.

Although there was no ostensible desire to hear the voice of God, doing so was inevitably a significant religious event (despite the lack of surprise or shock) for the worshipper and hostage came to understand that they were not the agent of experience and that this vocal presence could be seen as the epistemic aspect of salvation. The hostages who heard the voice of God unsurprisingly believed that he did not choose his (with the exception of one, all the hostages I worked with were male) cause arbitrarily. A conceptualization of agency in which the self is pitted against the alien is surely fundamental to religious faith as a dualistic notion. Whilst the voice might have been unremarkable, the fact that the worshipper was confident in attributing it to the divine reinforced this sense of duality and thus strengthened their respective faiths. Be they hostage or Orthodox worshipper, both perceived these vocal encounters to be privileged experiences of grace and communion with God (*благодать и общность с Богом*; *gracia y comunión con Dios*). These auditory experiences made God personal to them. It gave the few hostages

that claimed to hear the voice of God hope and some overarching experiential meaning in life when their lives seemed meaningless and without hope.

These ethnographic encounters remind us that the idea we can somehow access others' mental processes is neither shared across cultures nor necessarily contexts. Through their constant repetition, the formulaic phraseology of prayer and petitionary-like radio messages were subconsciously internalized, repeated in inner speech and thus adopted an ancestral feel (Bloch, 1975). This ambiguity regarding agency may even enhance the mystical appeal, the transcendental power or in the case of the Colombian hostages even the transformational power of the words. Some prisoners believed the words *pronto serás libre* would result in their release. The reason for this was quite simply some radio messages containing these words had in fact preceded the subsequent release of the hostage (Leonard, 2020b).

Our ability to imagine the agency of certain voices (radio voices or the priest's voice) is instrumental to our capacity to propose new sets of relationships between ourselves and the environment (in this case liturgical and radio listening). These acts of intentionality are multi-faceted and take place in complex contexts: one thinks of the multitude of voices at the church service, the intermingling of private prayer using the inner voice and the hierarchy of voices throughout the service—the priests, the chanting, the congregation's response. It was the same in the Colombian rainforest: the inner prayer intermingled with the familiar radio voice of a loved one, the belief held by some even that they heard the voice of God on the radio. The radio voice had become part of the prisoners' collective auditory consciousness and was a source of sonic and spiritual embodiment.

Reinterpretation of agency or intentionality is surely more likely if the listener is alone, meditative, or seeking help or solace. In these circumstances, locutions are more likely to be matched with different voices, and meanings and speech acts might be assigned to different agents. The messages left on *Voces del Secuestro* were often meant "for all the hostages" ("todos los rehenes"), but desperate captives would reconfigure their intentionality, affording the alleged performativity of the speech act such as "Dios te liberará" ("God will release you") for themselves. Some listeners wanted to personalize the perlocutionary force of the radio message, meaning that they wanted to believe its impact was meant for them only, and not all the hostages held across Colombia. Similarly, by believing that God was speaking through the priest when he spoke in Church Slavonic (as opposed to Russian), the worshipper subscribed to an analogous pragmatic interpretation; here the language (and not the voice) facilitated or afforded a reconfiguration of

intentionality. The worshipper wanted perhaps God to address her directly (and not the whole congregation); by reimagining the agency of the voice she was hoping to be the sole recipient of the speech act's perlocutionary force. As Duranti (1993) shows, truth and intentionality do not as some may suppose fit therefore neatly into the classical "speaker, message, and referent" model. Perceptions may vary as to who the speaker is, there could be multiple pragmatic interpretations of the meaning and an audience of unrelated individuals could claim to be the referent.

Conclusion

Research with Colombian hostages and Russian Orthodox worshippers shows that inner voices can be used to invoke linguistic representations of God in the absence of any training. These two pieces of fieldwork imply how much there is to learn by examining the subjectivity and dialogicality of voice when exterior and interior socialities are juxtaposed, and when different semiotic ideologies of voice come into contact. Just because an individual is kept in solitude does not mean that he or she is relieved of the condition of sociality (Du Bois, 2011). Such ethnographies seem to suggest also that we still lack a proper understanding of mental states.

The Colombian hostage reflexive self-analyses reveal then a complex prisoner discourse that reproduced familiar voices on the radio bound up in acoustic memory, speculation and mimetic response.[12] Both pieces of fieldwork show that semiotic and subjective interpretations of voice can be rewired in a context of repetitive prayer-like phraseology and circumstances conducive to "synesthetic spillings." Through semiotic rewiring, listeners can believe they heard the external voice of God and that it was meant for them personally.

This and related research emphasize that both linguistics and anthropology should account for human semiosis in all its manifestations, but thus far voice has received relatively little attention and yet the auditory footprint of voice can reverberate in the mind over long periods of time. Language is not the full carrier of meaning, but it is of course difficult to tease language and voice apart. Unlike words, intonation patterns or grammar, the epiphenomenal impact of voice can leave somebody spellbound. In terms of social semiotics, voice is surely both form and meaning and thus creates a problem for linguistics whose sub-disciplines are borne from the separation between form and

[12] I use the description "reflexive self-analysis" in the sense my interviews with the hostages led *them* to analyze retrospectively the social practices of the former hostages of which they were a part. These reflexive self-analyses were more than simply biographical narratives. Interviews led them to study and analyze the behavior of hostages, now that they are no longer part of the group.

meaning (Kress, 2001, p. 72). This semiotic indivisibility of voice is worthy of further research, particularly, I think, from the perspective of a dialogic approach to discursive practice.

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Povzetek

Članek združuje dve nepovezani etnografiji, v katerih nekdanji talci FARC, zaprti v kolumbijskem deževnem gozdu in tradicionalni ruski pravoslavni kristjani trdijo, da so slišali božji glas. Z analizo subjektivnih predpostavk obeh skupin poslušalcev o nameri in glasovnem delovanju, poskušamo razumeti, kakšne bi lahko bile okoliščine, zaradi katerih nekdo verjame, da je slišal "božanski" glas. Za katoliške kolumbijske ujetnike, ki so reciklirali tisto, kar so imeli za preroške radijske glasove in za ruske pravoslavne kristjane, ki so verjeli, da Bog govori skozi duhovnika, ko so slišali liturgični jezik (cerkvenoslovansko), je bil glas utelešen na neznan način. Zaradi kombinacije tega in različnih sinestetičnih dejavnikov se jim je glas zdel kot manifestacija božanske moči. Povezava besed z glasom je bila napačno usklajena, kar je povzročilo zmedo intencionalnosti in semiotične dvoumnosti v primerjavi z glasom in mimetičnimi odzivi nanj. Na podlagi etnografske raziskave z belimi kristjani v Ameriki, ki so iskali intuitivno nesamogenerirane misli, ta raziskava kaže, da je mogoče notranje glasove uporabiti za priklic jezikovnih predstavitev Boga brez kakršnega koli usposabljanja. Poleg tega ta dva dela terenskega dela dokazujeta, koliko se je treba naučiti s preučevanjem subjektivnosti in dialoškosti glasu, ko se zunanja in notranja družbenost postavljata ena nasproti druge in ko različne semiotične ideologije glasu pridejo v stik.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: molitev, glas, semioza, intencionalnost, antropologija molitve, radio

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