

Citing and Being

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Writers such as Bateson (1955/1972), Bakhtin (1982), Voloshinov (1986), Austin (1962), Goffman (1974, 1981), and Derrida (1988) (among others; e.g., Frege [1892/1980], Banfield [1978], Butler [1997], Lee [1997]) have all variously reflected, and reanalyzed, the transformative semiotics of citational acts (through analytics such as metacommunication, voicing / dialogicality, performativity, framing/footing, iteration/citatoriality, represented speech and thought, etc.). Particularly important for these authors are the ontological implications of citational acts, the ways in which their reflexive semiotics can come to bracket and decenter the ontic status of the signs and objects they cite (e.g., for Frege reference, for Austin and Bateson truth conditionality [sense and reference], for Bakhtin and Voloshinov monologic language, for Goffman the speaker, for Derrida presence and being; see Lucy 1993; Lee 1997; Nakassis 2012, 2013a, 2013b, 2016a).

In this paper, I explore the (meta)semiotics of this class of reflexive acts, tracing out the performative and ontological implications of their pragmatics. I focus on two particular ontologies—denotational code (viz. “language”) and the cinematic image—as they are wrought and transformed through citational framings of various sorts. The first case study engages the classic literature on codemixing to show how strategies of voicing and footing among post-colonial south Indian youth are enacted through a careful, and always tenuous and negotiated, alchemy of named/enregistered linguistic “codes” (in the instance, “Tamil” and “English”) whose pragmatics turns precisely on the bracketing and blurring of the lines between the very languages (and, by implication, political dispensations: Dravidianist and late capitalist) they citationally invoke. As I suggest, such linguistic (but also sartorial) practices put the very concept of language under erasure (Nakassis 2016a). The second case study turns to contemporary Tamil cinema, in particular, a scene from the 2011 film, *Mankatha* where one character/actor slaps another. I show how the entextualization of this image-text/act (Silverstein and Urban 1996) turns on what film scholars have called looking structures (Pasolini 1965/1988; Mulvey 1975; Willemsen 1994; cf. “voicing structures”) as they are embedded within particular production formats and participation frameworks (as Goffman called them). Ethnographic analysis among the films’ makers and fans reveal divergent entextualizations of this scene that turn, ultimately, on distinct ontological and political formulations of what a film image “is” (Bazin 1967/2004; Morgan 2006; Nakassis 2017). (Indeed, at stake is the political nature of the image, vacillating between a bourgeois realism authorially helmed by a director and a populist performativity grounded in the auratic charisma of a hero-star.) Such distinct image ontologies presuppose, as I show, distinct production formats, just as they entail an ontic “heteroglossia” of the image.

The paper concludes by reflecting on the semiotics of citatoriality and its implications regarding questions of being. Not simply (or even primarily) metaphysical, such implications have urgent methodological and analytic (i.e., pragmaticist [Peirce 1907/1998]) stakes; indeed, they (i) call into question and mandate a rethinking of our basic categories of analysis (language, code, mixing, text, image, film, author/speaker, indexicality, etc.) (Nakassis 2016a, 2018), (ii) suggest

the need for a more capacious conceptualization of the object of linguistic anthropological study (beyond the question of “language” or “interaction”; Nakassis 2016a), and (iii) demand a thorough integration of ethnographic methodology with semiotic theory.

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