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Abstract

In *Eloquence in Trouble* James Wilce describes how a particular speech genre is practiced in rural Bangladesh: "troubles talk," in which people lament some misfortune that has befallen them. Wilce describes how the language of laments has more than referential functions. Speakers do represent their misfortunes in lamenting them, but Wilce argues that these speakers also simultaneously reveal and shape their identities, engage in strategic interactions with interlocutors, and sometimes resist oppressive social orders. Using data from almost six years of work in Bangladesh and a substantial corpus of videorecorded troubles talk, Wilce convincingly demonstrates that laments serve multiple social and interactional functions.

Comments

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WILCE, JAMES. Eloquence in Trouble. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998. xix + 300 pp.

In Eloquence in Trouble James Wilce describes how a particular speech genre is practiced in rural Bangladesh: “troubles talk,” in which people lament some misfortune that has befallen them. Wilce describes how the language of laments has more than referential functions. Speakers do represent their misfortunes in lamenting them, but Wilce argues that these speakers also simultaneously reveal and shape their identities, engage in strategic interactions with interlocutors, and sometimes resist oppressive social orders. Using data from almost six years of work in Bangladesh and a substantial corpus of videorecorded troubles talk, Wilce convincingly demonstrates that laments serve multiple social and interactional functions.

Wilce intends to integrate work in medical anthropology, on cultural constructions of illness and suffering, with linguistic anthropological work on the details of linguistic practices. He succeeds, by showing how the details of troubles talk can both express and sometimes shape experiences of suffering. His analysis gives convincing and much-needed evidence against reductionist interpretations of illness talk, by attending both to the experiential aspects of bodily suffering and to the social functions that laments serve. Wilce also integrates an historical perspective into his analysis, describing how the genre of troubles talk has been changing over the last generation or so—as people increasingly criticize lamentation as too self-assertive. He shows how younger Bangladeshi women’s laments are sometimes more direct in their resistance to the social order, at the same time as lamentation is becoming less common because of social disapproval.

Troubles talk is a rich genre to examine, as it connects to many salient issues. Wilce examines speakers’ experiences of suffering, which allows him to introduce a phenomenological perspective and to discuss spirituality. He examines the laments of particular individuals over time, which allows him to consider life course development and the construction of the self. He describes two particularly compelling cases of “mad” speakers, and these allow Wilce to examine cultural conceptions of, and the social construction of, mental illness. He also analyzes how the “self-assertiveness” of Bangladeshi women’s laments can resist the social order, and this allows him to discuss

how particular interactions interconnect with social power relations. Finally, laments generally take the form of first person narratives, and Wilce takes the opportunity to describe how Bangladeshi speakers use pronouns and other linguistic forms to narrate themselves.

In exploring all these interesting aspects of troubles talk, Wilce refuses to privilege either a psychological or a social account. He does not focus on individuals' experiences and representations as the key to interpreting Bangladeshi laments. But neither does he reduce particular individuals' situations to larger social patterns. At times, this attention to individual, social and interactional aspects of the phenomenon seems to be a problem—as Wilce simultaneously relies on several factors that seem to represent incompatible levels of explanation. Although he does not articulate a full account, however, Wilce's approach points the way toward a theory of verbal practice that might successfully integrate individual, interactional, cultural and social levels of explanation. He draws on Bourdieu (1970/1977), Giddens (1984), and others who have tried to overcome invidious oppositions between structure and practice, and he follows Csordas (1994) and others who add psychological concepts to such an account. Although more theoretical work remains to be done, Wilce shows how good work in psychological and linguistic anthropology can support a more comprehensive, multi-layered account of human action.

The richness of the book is also its primary weakness. Wilce connects his analyses of Bangladeshi laments to discussions of narrative self-construction, patriarchal power relations, cultural constructions of the person, strategic improvisation in verbal interaction, language socialization, the construction of illness in interactions between healers and patients, the analysis of suffering in cultural context, the historical changes brought by globalization, the cultural representation of madness, the semiotic mediation of experience, and more. All of these are interesting topics, and Wilce makes a convincing case that troubles talk in Bangladesh can illuminate each of them. But one book could not possibly describe how all these processes work. This comes through in the writing. The book is organized into short sections, each of which raises an interesting issue that, more often than not, gets dropped before it gets convincingly articulated. The extended sections that focus on particular encounters are more compelling, but in his

theoretical exegesis Wilce moves too quickly to give compelling conceptual analyses. The issues that Wilce raises in this book could sustain a decade or two of writing, and I look forward to Wilce's future writings as he more fully elaborates the promising work he begins in this book.