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Animal Politics and The Placemaking Practices of Pigeons

Describing the placemaking practices of feral pigeons
(*Colomba livia*) through a multimodal analysis of their
communication



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Animal Politics and The Placemaking Practices of Pigeons

Describing the placemaking practices of feral pigeons
(*Colomba livia*) through a multimodal analysis of their
communication

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Introduction

This paper examines the placemaking capabilities of a group of Pigeons in the Sarphatipark of Amsterdam. This is done through employing a posthumanist, multimodal view of language as an emergent, emplaced property of social (inter)action (Mondada, 2016; Mondémé, 2022; Pennycook, 2018). Through this conceptualization and understanding of language, we may call into question the constructed separation between humans and other life forms on the planet, between humans and world, and offer “a rethinking of the relationship to all those Others that suffered in the construction of humanity... while also shifting the idea of what it means to be human” (Pennycook, 2018, p. 449). This posthumanist view of language allows for a detailed investigation to be carried out into the ways in which the Pigeons of Sarphatipark actively negotiate space through their interactional and communicative practices with each other, their surroundings, the material artefacts of the park, and other Animals (including humans). Language, as it is understood in this paper, simply refers to the collection of communicative “repertoires” (Pennycook, 2018) that are accessed through an individual’s mind and body, as well as through the social and physical realms that they exist with/in (Goodwin, 1999).

This study is inspired by the tools of Conversation Analysis, a method which originated in the field of sociology in order to understand the minutiae of human social interaction which has also been proven to be an effective mode of inquiry into understanding the communication practices of non-human animals (Mondémé, 2022). Conversation Analysis (CA) is a tool that was developed not by linguists, but by sociologists for the purpose of studying (human) social interaction, with the main focus being on communicative *actions*, i.e. greeting, requesting, offering, insulting, etc. (Logue & Stivers, 2012; Mondada, 2016). These actions are understood as emerging from within social interaction, or being “organized not by individual speakers but within social interaction” (Mondada, 2016, p. 338). While Conversation Analysis began as a way of understanding talk in human social interaction, it has evolved into a field that focuses on action, and, thanks to the use of video recordings of fieldwork as data, increasingly on the “temporally and sequentially organized details of actions that account for how co-participants orient to each other’s multimodal conduct, and assemble it in meaningful ways, moment by moment,” (Mondada, 2016, p. 340). This emphasis on social (inter)action as being made up of multiple semiotic resources unfolding over time opens the door for the present paper’s posthumanist study of Pigeon placemaking practices (Goodwin, 1999). Through the application of this multimodal understanding of CA, “it is possible and heuristic, to take an analytical premise that considers an Animal’s actions as turns as long as they are oriented to, and understood, by human participants, as meaningful behaviors inserted into a relevant sequence of

actions” (Heritage, 2009, p. 80). Through incorporating the embodied theories of Conversation Analysis, I was able to describe what was being said by the Pigeons and how this related to their placemaking in Sarphatipark. While the exact methodologies of CA were not employed (i.e., full transcriptions of every communicative interaction), the underlying principles of analyzing turn-taking and sequential order in communication across species were vital to my analysis (Henry et al., 2015; Mondémé, 2022).

Theoretical Framework

Previously in linguistics, and in the humanities in general, “language and the material world [were] treated as entirely separate domains of inquiry” (Goodwin, 1999, p. 1491) where language was isolated from its environment, thus creating a “dichotomy between text and context” (p. 1490). Sociolinguistic researchers have been trying to move beyond this view of language and grammar for decades, emphasizing a view of language not as an entity that exists within the mind of individuals, but rather as something that is emergent in social interaction, as well as embodied, and emplaced (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, 2016; Carbaugh, 2007; Pennycook, 2017, 2018; Shankar & Cavanaugh, 2012). In particular, the “embodied turn” (Nevile, 2015) in linguistics that has taken place in recent decades has opened the conceptualization of “language” to include a number of different bodily actions, such as:

“hand and other gestures (e.g., including pointing, waving); gaze direction; posture and orientation (see Schegloff, 1998); facial expression; placing and shifting parts of the body; moving the whole body from one place to another (e.g., walking, jumping); manual/physical acts such as reaching and handling/touching (including material objects and technologies, the surrounding environment, the body itself e.g., clapping, grooming); other participants; as well as larger activities like operating equipment, flying/driving a vehicle, reading, typing, handling food or eating, or playing music” (Nevile, 2015, p. 122)

These bodily movements, much like talk, are just another semiotic resource that is available to interlocutors as they interact and communicate (Goodwin, 1999). In addition to these bodily movements, the material artefacts that exist around/within social interaction “can provide semiotic structure without which the constitution of particular kinds of action being invoked through talk would be impossible” (Goodwin, 1999, p. 1492). Taking these different semiotic resources into account, Pennycook describes language as a resource that is “distributed across people, places, and

artefacts” (2018, p. 446), rather than focusing solely on vocalizations in speech. Pennycook (2018), referencing the influential work on materiality by Barad (2003), highlights the epistemological and ontological changes that are taking place in the social sciences (and beyond), thanks to posthumanist theorization, namely that “the assumptions of modernity—that nature is external, a resource to be exploited, that humans are separate, self-governing, on an upward spiral of self-improvement to escape the limits of nature—are coming under scrutiny” (Pennycook, 2018, p. 448-449). This emphasis on materiality breaks down the separation between human/Animal (or nature/culture, etc.) through a breakdown of the more theoretical ideas surrounding “knowing” and “being” because they “are not isolatable, but rather they are mutually implicated. We do not obtain knowledge by standing outside of the world; we know because ‘we’ are of the world” (Barad, 2003, p. 829). Through this posthumanist lens, it becomes much easier to understand how we as linguists can study Animal communication with an approach that is not so dissimilar to studies of our own communication practices.

This inherent connection of communication and the surroundings/the environment brings us to the geographical concept of place. Place is something that emerges/is created through the attachment of meaning to spaces, thus the way we communicate about and within spaces can tell us a lot about the cultures, beliefs, and experiences of these inherently social places (Carbaugh, 1996). As a linguistic act, *placemaking* is defined as “the assigning, through interaction, of social meanings to (physical) space(s), thereby creating places that are perceived as the basis of belonging” (Cornips & de Rooij, 2018b, p. 9), zooming further and further out from the view of language as something that exists solely within the mind (of the human). Thus, we can acknowledge that communication does not happen in a vacuum—it will always be occurring somewhere and will be both affected by and affect the communication practices that emerge there in interaction (Carbaugh, 1996; Cornips & van den Hengel, 2021; Schieffelin, 2018). In his 1996 paper *Naturalizing Communication and Culture*, Donal Carbaugh summarizes the relationship between place and communication succinctly, saying communication “can thus be conceived as radically and doubly ‘placed,’ as both located in places and as locating particular senses of those places” (p. 38). Communication thus emerges from place, while place then emerges from communication—it is this relationship that imbues place with distinctive social importance and simultaneously forms the basis for social action and connection (Carbaugh, 1996; Schieffelin, 2018).

Methodology

This paper aims to employ an ethical ethnographic framework to the study of Pigeons, and adds to the growing number of voices that are calling for Animals to be seen as (political and ethical) subjects in their own right in ethnographic research, where they are treated ethically as “persons” whose groups and cultures have evolved and exist alongside humans, as well as other Animals/beings, in a complex, interspecific, social system (Buller, 2014; Hodgetts & Lorimer, 2015; Lestel et al., 2006). This was done with as little anthropocentric bias as possible by recognizing the Pigeons of this study as “participants in the co-production of knowledge” (Abrell & Gruen, 2020, p. 2) rather than as objects of study. As mentioned above, the Pigeons and other non-human Animals that were involved in this study were/are seen as persons with their own rights, contrary to many non-indigenous, Euro-American epistemologies, so as to avoid objectifying and othering them, as is also the goal in (modern) human-centered research. The data used in this research was collected through ethnographic fieldwork conducted during the months of September–November 2022, with the majority of data being collected during the month of October. As pigeons are considered “liminal animals”, i.e., “non-domesticated wild animals that have adapted to living in close proximity to human-built environment as co-residents of urban and suburban spaces” (Abrell & Gruen, 2020, p. 12), I was able to easily observe them from a distance in the park and video record their actions on my phone for later analysis. As a Human person observing the lives and communication practices of Pigeon persons, there was of course a “cross-species communication barrier” (Abrell & Gruen, 2020, p. 5). However, through the posthumanist and multimodal understanding of language repertoires that I have detailed earlier, I interpreted the communicative practices of the Pigeons and described my perceptions of the messages they conveyed through their engagement with the multiple semiotic resources available to them, through their bodies and the material world around them in Sarphatipark.

Case Study: Interspecies Relating and Feeding

One of the hotspots that the Pigeons of Sarphatipark seem to frequent is not only a geographical space in the park but is tied to a relationship with a Human woman. In this event, there is a co-construction of a *place of feeding*



Figure 1 (03:19)
Woman enters the park, Pigeons turn to follow her.



Figure 2 (03:41)
As a different woman passes, the Pigeons do not initiate interaction with her.



Figure 3 (03:42)
Pigeon at front chooses to fly to where the first woman parked her bike (out of frame).

happening through the interactions between the Pigeons and this Human, who can be seen cycling into the park in Figure 1. Before the Human enters the park, the Pigeons are observed in a group searching for food around the trunk of a tree, across the park from a European Ash that the Pigeons are often seen congregating in. As they search the ground together, the group of Pigeons create a *place of eating*—one in which they synchronize their actions in the search for food together in one specific space. Bodily synchronization can be understood as an act of sociality and of “‘identification’ with the other, a process of ‘bodily mapping the self onto the other (or the other onto the self)’” (de Waal, 2012, p. 123 as cited in Cornips & van den Hengel, 2021, p. 10). This *place of eating* can be distinguished from a *place of feeding* as the Pigeons are on their own, searching for food; there is no other actor involved in this place, nor is there a central food source to be divvied up—each Pigeon searches individually, while maintaining group cohesion and bodily synchronization.

This place of eating transforms as the woman on the bike enters the park (Figure 1). This woman has been observed by the fieldworker on multiple occasions at the same/similar times, this time on the morning of 11 October at 10:10, thus also implying the importance of temporality to the construction of place among the Pigeons. Because of the presumed regularity of her visits, it seems as if the Pigeons know/are familiar with her, because as soon as she arrives through the entrance of the park, the Pigeons turn and begin moving towards her and her typical spot (again, within view of the European Ash). Additionally, as the first woman cycles into the park, a different woman with a baby in a stroller walks past the Pigeons (Figure 2). The Pigeons do not engage with this woman, likely due to a lack of familiarity. The recognition of the first woman and the ensuing interaction between the Pigeons and her create a place of interspecific community, one that is tied to the cultural memory of the Pigeons through their familiarity with/memory of the Human, while also excluding Humans who are not familiar to either the Pigeons nor the Human they know (i.e., the woman in Figure 2). More specifically in this moment, a co-constructed place of feeding emerges, as the Human begins to scatter food for the Pigeons and other birds of the park. This differs from the place of eating that the pigeons had previously created when they were searching for food on their own—their food is now coming from an interspecific interaction where the historical relationship with the woman, as well as the food itself, become salient aspects of this communication event.

Discussion and Conclusions

Through the bringing together of conversation-analytic tools and a multimodal understanding of language with the study of place and placemaking, this paper contributes to an expanding posthumanist understanding of what “language” is and how the Animals that we humans coexist with are political and agentic actors. Through this posthumanist view, we can (begin to) understand

how the Pigeons of Sarphatipark speak: through the positioning of their bodies in relation to one another, by viewing a bodily turn or movement away from a participant as a denial of a communicative action, or by the ways they choose whether or not to approach/engage with another being. Through their interactions with humans and the food provided by them, the Pigeons demonstrate the importance of the material world in their communication practices, where places of feeding can be distinguished from places of eating through the inclusion of active food sources in the space where communication occurs. These various embodied actions communicate complex, political relationships with other Pigeons and other beings in the park, including humans, where the Pigeons, as well as all other non-human actors, can be seen acting as distinct, individual beings that are co-creators of the world(s) that we exist with/in (Ahlhaus & Niesen, 2015; von Essen & Allen, 2017). Through understanding language as a broad, complex concept distributed across the mind, body, environment, culture, and sociality, linguists and other social scientists can begin to move further away from a fragmented conceptualization of the world, to one where “we’ are not outside observers of the world” nor are we “simply located at particular places in the world; rather, we are part of the world in its ongoing intra-activity” (Barad, 2003, p. 828). As we shift our understandings of language, politics, and interaction from an anthropocentric view which includes only humans and the interactions between them and other beings, environments, and objects, to one where the agency, languages, and lifeworlds of individual Animals are acknowledged, a (human) cultural shift may begin to take place such that we (academics, humans, etc.) can better engage with the problematized relations that exist in modern, western, capitalist societies, and continue to imagine and co-create a more just and equitable experience of planetary interspecific becomings.

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