



Anthropology at the Phonosonic Nexus

NICHOLAS HARKNESS
ILLINOIS-URBANA CHAMPAIGN

In March 2010, two calls for papers for the 2010 AAA Annual Meeting pointed to the increasing interest in voice as an object of anthropological study: "Sung Performance and the Circulation of Linguistic Forms" (organizer: Steve Black, UCLA) and "Give Voice a Voice: Anthropologies of the Voice" (organizer: Jessica Taylor, U Toronto). When taken as a pair, these proposals—in the manner of most of the literature on vocal anthropology—presented the problematic of voice along three core axes of comparison. The first axis deals with music and language as two related systems of communication in which the voice usually plays a salient mediating role. The second highlights sound and body as two ontic dimensions through which vocalization can be manifest and experienced. And the third considers the tropic extensions of voice, which project via metonymy and metaphor cultural notions of the authenticity, particularity or authority of an individual singing or speaking body onto distinct, potentially generalizable identities.

These two proposals—which, at the time of this writing, were scheduled sessions for the November meeting—rightfully point to the need for an analytic understanding of voice that can account for the cultural place of vocalization at the semiotic intersection of communication, ontic categories of experience and inhabitable social roles. Furthermore, they indicate the need for a concept or framework that is methodologically viable for ethnographic research.

The Phonic and the Sonic

Faced with this problem in my research, I have found it helpful to treat the voice as an ongoing intersection between the *phonic* production and organization of sound on the one hand, and the *sonic* uptake and categorization of sound in the world on the other. Treating the voice as a *phonosonic nexus* has allowed me to explore how vocalization is situated at the intersection of multiple frameworks of meaningfulness and distinction as a form of culturally regimented semiotic engagement with and inhabitation of social worlds.

For example, among conservative Evangelical Presbyterian Christians in Seoul, South Korea, where I have conducted research since 2005, the voice serves as a central locus for the embodiment and expression of contemporary Korean Christian personhood. In sung performances, these Christians use European-style classical singing (*sōngak*) to instantiate a form of religiosity that they associate with Korean ethnonational advancement and spiritual enlightenment. Speech and song are linked qualitatively during church ritual to create an acoustic environment that congregants describe as peaceful and holy—attributes that also serve as idealized qualities of a modern, Christian, postcolonial, post-dictatorship Korea. In church and beyond, the phonics of vocalization are related to meaningful sonic frameworks at different scales. These structures of sonic

differentiation range from the minutest communicative aspects of vocalization (eg, prosody in speech or voice quality in song) to the most widely encompassing acoustemologies (eg, the genres of vocalization that differentiate the soundscape of the church from the soundscape of the street).

In terms of speech, the experienced qualities, or what Charles S Peirce called *qualia*, of this version of the Korean Christian voice belong to verbal registers that also include lexical and grammatical categories, as well as coordinated gesture. In terms of song, the *qualia* of the voice belong to sung registers that are produced through specific types of musical and linguistic texts and are associated with particular performance contexts. The church forms an institutional center from which these phonosonic normativities emanate and circulate via real-time enactments and their digital broadcasts (eg, via the churches' content-rich websites).

Expression and Embodiment

These vocally mediated communicative registers are linked to normativities of the body. That is, the phonic engagement with sonic frameworks is linked to perceived bodily states and types of observable bodily activity. For example, descriptions of the ideal Christian voice usually concern its relative "cleanliness." Cleanliness serves as an ideal quality that, when experienced, indexes bodily health, affective composure, and spiritual holiness. When a singing voice is described as clean, it refers both to the acoustic experience (eg, lacking extra vibrations such as a wide vibrato or a fricative hiss) as well as to the materials and manner of the sound's production (eg, lack abrasions on the vocal cords, low subglottic pressure). The quality of vocal cleanliness can be perceived in both the most expressive dimensions of vocalization (the sound waves that one hears) and the most embodied (the manipulation and maintenance of the vocal apparatus). The phonosonic nexus accounts for the alignment of meaningful bodily configurations—from minute anatomical manipulations to full-bodied dispositions—with meaningful sonic configurations via culturally legitimate phonic action.

This becomes important when a quality such as cleanliness serves as a key aspect of vocalization that differentiates the contemporary church from past generations. When the notion of cleanliness is applied to the voice—spoken or sung—it can differentiate a modern Christian voice from the rough or harsh voices of the Korean past. For these Presbyterian Christians, roughness of voice indexes suffering and hardship—experiences that are still vivid in the ethnonational memory of Japanese colonization, war, rapid urbanization and military dictatorship. The recent Korean past is considered to be sad because of these experiences, and rough voices are understood to belong to past forms of tragic expression and lament. The phonosonic model of roughness is contrasted with composed, peaceful, joyful affective states; clean, healthy bodies; Western sounds

and Christian hymns; and smooth, calm speech—all of which are considered to belong to an advanced, enlightened Korean Christian present.

Phonosonic Voice and Social Voicing

As the phonosonic nexus creates an indexical linkage of bodily action to sonic frameworks of communication and orientation, it also indexically links these sonic entailments to higher-order categories of social identity. Suffering bodies, lamenting voices, rough sounds of speech all cue up identifiable personae, stereotypical members of the older generation who serve as personifications of a troubled Korean past. The voice, then, becomes the medium through which not only bodily dispositions and sensations are linked to contextually emergent phonosonic practice, but also through which emitters of voice are situated within and aligned to a trans-contextual social universe of culturally meaningful identities.

Figurative uses of the voice—the metonymical and metaphorical extensions of "having a voice"—are premised on a notion that there is such a framework into which expressible interests can fit. The communicative alignment to social voices is, in a Peircean sense, a structural replica (a diagrammatic icon) of the phonosonic nexus itself. Over and above the production and organization of sound in relation to frameworks of categorizing sound in the world is the production and organization of interested self-representations in relation to an arrangement of interests—other voices—in the social world. The actual phonosonic voice becomes, in a Bakhtinian sense, a metonym of the interests that particular social voices represent, and a metaphor for their qualitative attributes.

Music and language, audible sound and the sounding body, individual persons and generalized personae all are linked through the phonosonics of vocalization. In dealing with the voice, there is a persistent methodological danger of conceptual circularity that comes with over-emphasizing any one of these axes or their conceptual poles—whether speech or song, aurality or embodiment, literal or tropic understandings of voice. Instead of emphasizing or essentializing any of these, or even a particular sensory channel at the expense of others (eg, aurality versus visuality), the notion of the phonosonic nexus highlights the culturally mediated production, organization, uptake and categorization of sound in terms of complex, genred forms of social action (revealing such essentialization precisely as an ideologically distilled effect of cultural mediation). This semiotically significant action is carried out in multiple modalities, which are coordinated with the phonosonic nexus. By treating the voice in this manner, this attractive but analytically elusive object becomes more viable and illuminating for anthropology.

Nicholas Harkness received his PhD in anthropology from the University of Chicago. He is currently a Korea Foundation Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Illinois-Urbana Champaign. In autumn 2011, he will join the anthropology faculty at Harvard University as an assistant professor. AN