Contact and Its Allure

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Using Phaticity to Explore Social Relations, Technology and More

*There is more hidden life in opening a door than in asking a question.*
—Robert Walser, Jakob von Gunten

There is a relatively new type of criminal activity in Japan colloquially known as *ore ore sagi*: literally, the “It’s me, it’s me!” fraud. In 2004 Japanese police formally baptized it as *furikome sagi* (the “Deposit money!” fraud), and in 2013 suggested a new name, *kāsan tasukete sagi* (the “Help me, Mother!” fraud). Variations permitted, its modus operandi is as follows: A young male impostor approaches an elderly person via telephone, posing as the target’s grandson or nephew (or son, as the 2013 name suggests) living in a distant place, saying, “Ore, ore”: ‘It’s me, it’s me.’ He tells the target that he happens to be in a situation where he needs quick cash: car accident, police arrest, etc. He then requests the target to deposit money into his bank account, appealing to the sense of generosity that kin are supposed to possess.

Media coverage has helped establish a stable characterological frame: the money-crazed jobless youth in the city and the lonely senior living off a pension—two crucial characters of non-(re)production in Japan’s neoliberal predicament—brought together in contact through telecommunicative means. Seemingly easily preventable, this scheme has been wildly successful. (The police report that the total fraud figures for 2013 reached about 248 million dollars.) Its effectiveness plainly shows the extent to which the management of solitude and indifference has become an everyday, ongoing project for many people (Allison 2013). The imposter manufactures a need to contact and hacks kinship by replacing indifference with interest.

In my previous fieldwork on Japanese life writing, my main research interlocutors were women who were in their seventies in the mid-2000s, living in Tokyo suburbs or second-tier provincial cities. They all appreciated my project, and no single person declined to be interviewed at their home, noting “How rare it is nowadays to see a young man visiting old persons at home to hear their stories.” When I was ready for my eighth or ninth interview, however, several of those who had helped me before cautioned me, in a manner cloaked in indirection: “Perhaps you want to be careful when you open the door.” My friends worried that at “the door,” the neighbors might see the interviewee and me together and, based on this witness, formulate a theory along the characterological frame mentioned above—namely, that the interviewee is being approached by a suspicious man—precisely because “nowadays it is rare to see a young man visiting an old person at home.” My friends’ scenario fantasizes both value and danger at the moment of contact, a societal anxiety that is as underspecified as it is real. Contact is an allure.

Our commonsense holds that we get in touch with each other in order to get some business done. The *ore ore sagi* perpetrators, therefore, are like us, commonsensical philosophers of communication. Like us, they presuppose purposive circulation, some thing moving toward an end, and always seek to be interesting, worthy of attention. Now, for a moment, or for a change, let us forget our desire to be interesting. Let us try to consider the allure of contact as such: not to trace a movement across a bridge but to intensely scrutinize a still image of bridging.

The allure of contact may be productively explored in terms of phaticity, the configuration (or “function”; *Einstellung*) of a communicative sign that generates salient focus upon the “channel” or media through which it is delivered (Jakobson 1960:355; see also Duranti 2009). Phatic signaling is often a mere, underdetermined index of whether communication is happening at all: the red notification flag on Facebook, the heaviness of a package from a lover, the body subtly repositioned in a crowded train, the squeaking of a door.

Phaticity is curiously undertheorized, though ethnographers regularly acknowledge it (but often only in a phatic way). This should be surprising to anthropologists because it is perhaps one of the few concepts whose anthropological ancestry is clear: it was Malinowski who coined it (1923). How might anthropology—especially linguistic anthropology, insofar as it professes to study facts of communication—reclaim this concept as a way to animate our ongoing conversation about issues such as affect, economy, social relations, institutionality, and technology?
Recent reconsiderations have productively linked phaticity to these issues, bespeaking its cross-cultural significance (Elyachar 2010; Kockelman 2010; Lemon 2013; Slotta 2015). To inquire into phaticity means to take seriously the infrastructure and interface of indexical triggering, to investigate distribution of sociotechnical actants (see eg, Latour 1996) materializing an event, and to examine qualia, metrics, and fantasies of contact and distance. What do idioms and phenomena like “clickbait,” “trigger warnings,” “reach” and “frequency” (as in advertising), and “impact factors” tell us about how people and institutions exposed to them ideologize desire, personhood, expertise, copresence, etc? How does affective labor capitalize on phaticity as a calculable form of value? What, really, is at stake when those “three dots” flicker “while the person on the other end of your text message is writing a response” (Bennett 2014)?

A friend of mine from my fieldwork, a woman in Tokyo suburbs who lives on her limited pension income and her husband’s disability payments, once gave me a surprising commentary on ore ore sagi. Clearly troubled by these cases of fraud, she nonetheless said: “But I could definitely understand why these old people, people like us, get deceived. It’s because they want to give. They just want to give, to anyone.” Her story astutely bespeaks a subdued but urgent desire to engender sociality in today's Japan. However, she relates this sociality not to reciprocity and dialogue but to a pain and pleasure of giving/ losing that only oozes out through moments of contact. “I would be duped, most certainly,” she said.

My friend made it sound as though “these old people” would secretly feel thankful—the irrealis is important—for the coming of an imposter, a nobody, because, her theory goes, nobody would come visit them today to demand things, to demand stories. Finding themselves in strange suburban solitude, they desire the felt reality of a semiotic channel, even a fraudulent one and even only momentarily, an exquisitely fleeting intimation of alterity on the other side of the channel. The theory of phaticity offered by my friend is perfectly unconnected to the nostalgic return to “reciprocity” and “harmony” often fetishized in Japanese cultural nationalism. Instead, she seizes upon concepts like loss, resignation, and futility, a giving without a return.

What sociopolitical life is hidden in “just wanting to give”? How does one open a door?

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