Communicating Beyond Language offers a timely and lively appraisal of the concept of communicative repertoires—resources we use to express who we are when in dialogue with others. Each chapter describes and illustrates the communicative resources humans deploy daily, but rarely think about—not only the multiple languages we use, but how we dress or gesture, how we greet each other or tell stories, the nicknames we coin, and the mass-media references we make—and how these resources combine in infinitely varied performances of identity. The book also discusses how our repertoires shift and grow over the course of a lifetime, as well as how a repertoire perspective can lead to a rethinking of cultural diversity and human interaction, from categorizing people’s differences to understanding how our repertoires can expand and overlap with others’, thereby helping us to find common ground and communicate in increasingly multicultural schools, workplaces, markets, and social spheres.

This book affirms the importance of communicative repertoires with highly engaging discussions and contemporary examples from mass media, popular culture, and everyday life. The result is a fresh and exciting work that will resonate with students and scholars in sociolinguistics, intercultural communication, applied linguistics, and education.

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Betsy Rymes
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Take a walk today down a street in any large urban center, anywhere in the world, and you will encounter multiple ways of speaking and dressing, gesturing and greeting, expressing sadness or joy, love or hate—in short, massive communicative diversity. How do we learn to get along in this complex communicative milieu? How do people who walk down the same street and who share a common humanity but express themselves radically differently live together without continual conflict and chaos? This book addresses these questions by describing the communicative repertoires through which, in dialogue with others, we express who we are and find common ground. Each chapter describes and illustrates communicative resources humans deploy daily, but rarely think about—not only the multiple languages we use, but how we dress or gesture, how we greet each other or tell stories, the names and nicknames we coin, the mass media references we make—and how these resources combine in infinitely varied ways when people interact.

Often, these interactional combinations happen in multiple languages and, always, in concert with expressive creativity that goes “beyond language.” Below, I elucidate what I mean by “communicating beyond language” piece-by-piece—defining in abstract brevity what the rest of the book will elaborate and exemplify. Then I will briefly explain two critical analytic pathways to examining such communicating: First, I use the concept of communicative repertoire to draw our attention to the multiplicity of communicative means. Second, I use the concept of everyday metacommentary (commenting on communication) to illuminate which features of one’s repertoire are most relevant. In exemplifying different forms of “communicating beyond language,” or, as described in the subtitle of this book, “everyday encounters with diversity,” I will return to these concepts of communicative repertoire and metacommentary throughout the volume.
Communicating

What counts as “communicating”? Engaging a teenager in a conversation about sex? Writing a paper for a graduate school seminar? Using spoken Hindi in a high school English class? This book illustrates how each of these scenarios potentially counts as communicating but some may be more mutually engaging, depending on how people approach each other. Over the course of a lifetime, as humans move in and out of vastly varying contexts of social relations, communicating requires massive flexibility: A parent of young teens is surprised to realize she knows that the phrase “sick” is a positive modifier; a graduate student suddenly impresses herself by using the word “alterity” having never learned an explicit definition; a high-school student born and raised in Philadelphia starts ironically using the Bollywood/Hindi term of endearment “Jaan-e-man” (sweetheart) when talking with his South Asian-American classmates. In each of these cases, people’s repertoires are expanding to overlap with those of their family, friends, classmates or colleagues. In this way, they are communicating.

Every day, students in most urban schools face these kinds of communicative complexities. As soon as students enter any public school in the United States they are, by law, given a home language survey. It is not uncommon for a single urban high school to collect home language surveys reporting over 75 home languages. And, in many homes, far more than a single language is called on to communicate. Individual students who come from those homes are usually multilingual themselves. As one Moroccan ninth-grader in a Philadelphia area high school explained to me, “At home, we speak English, French, Spanish, Arabic, a little of it all.” Usually, this multilingualism is not restricted to “home”: Another student from the same school speaks a little Urdu/Hindi, Pashto, and English all evening in his after-school job at a family store. Another speaks French and English at a hair-braiding shop where she works. These students need each of these languages in order to communicate in different contexts, every day.

Beyond Language

So, with all these languages in circulation, why talk about communication beyond language? Each of the examples above illustrates the multiplicity of languages—French, English, Arabic, Hindi—people use. What other forms of communication do we learn as we enter a new community? As the parents of kids who use “sick” as a complement witness, these kids may also have very specific ways of acting when they say “sick!”—as well as specific clothes they wear and things they carry. The same holds true for a high school friend calling out “Jaan-e-man” or a graduate student mentioning “alterity,” who most likely is wearing jeans and an old t-shirt and carrying a backpack.

Similarly, as multilingual students begin to navigate school, they will need to call on a communicative repertoire that extends beyond those represented by
language labels given on the home language survey. How they dress, what their hair looks like, the nicknames they go by, how they greet, say goodbye, express thanks, respond to teacher questions, format an essay, or invite a friend home with them, will all influence their pathway through school and life. This book emphasizes this entire repertoire of communicative tools as a way of understanding not only how a multilingual teenager navigates high school, but how, in this massively diversifying world, accomplishing even basic daily routines requires greater awareness of those forms of communicative diversity that, while often below our conscious awareness, are crucial to successful interaction.

Building Common Ground: Comembership and Participatory Culture

All the scenarios given so far also illustrate another point about communicating: It involves more than one person. I do not communicate to someone, we communicate together. This should be obvious. However, much of language instruction is based on a notion of “correctness” that entails individual—not collaborative—mastery. Once an individual “internalizes” a set of rules, that individual will be able to spew out correct language. Many people can take years of language classes and score well on language proficiency tests, but have extreme difficulty communicating in that language. And yet, most of the time, people are concerned with communicating to one another, not achieving a perfect language test score. Accordingly, this book illustrates how people communicate collaboratively, in interaction: At times seeking out those areas of overlap that can lead to fulfilling engagements with other people; at other times, running into communicative blocks.

Starting from the point of view that communicating is a collaborative activity, this book builds from interactional sociolinguistic and anthropological models of communication (rather than strictly linguistic ones) as useful ways to understand interaction, because such models are grounded in what people do with each other. Those who study social interaction and learning have looked carefully at how people seek out common ground, even in cases where languages are not completely shared or differences seem, initially, to be prohibitive of successful communication.

So, if individuals’ proficiency in a shared language is not the sufficient common ground to hold us together as communicators, what else is needed? What sustains interaction and encourages people to share themselves? What gives us the sense we will be understood? To answer this question, Fred Erickson and Jeff Shultz (1982), carefully analyzed the negotiation of common ground in the context of college counselor and student meetings—what they call “gate-keeping interviews.” While all the participants were speakers of English, the counselor and the various college students differed from each other in many obvious ways. So, part of the interactional work in these sessions involved figuring out how
to communicate across those differences. Finding common ground was crucial in these interviews and this exploration occurred through initial negotiation of “comembership” which Erickson and Shultz (p. 17) defined as follows:

Comembership is an aspect of performed social identity that involves particularistic attributes of status shared by counselor and student—for example, race and ethnicity, sex, interest in football, graduation from the same high school, acquaintance with the same individual.

While the obvious demographic segmentations “race, ethnicity, sex” are involved as candidate comembership categories, Erickson and Shultz emphasize that there was far more fluidity in what could evolve into comembership. And whatever became the grounds for comembership, when participants in a counseling interaction shared high degrees of comembership, the counselor aligned with the interests of the student. However, when some degree of comembership was not arrived at, the counselor aligned with the institution. This research also made it clear that alignment during an interaction was contingent more on extra-linguistic cues—such as body language, gestures, and intonation—than on language itself or even the content of what was being said. Arriving at comembership was less like an exchange of information than a dance, a *pas de deux* in which each partner carefully negotiated with the other physically and emotionally to arrive at a shared sense of order.

Erickson and Shultz’s work on comembership introduced the notion that communication is a careful negotiation about what those communicating share and how that common ground can build through an interaction—even a highly controlled interaction like an advising session, in which the advisee and the advisor are being pushed together artificially by extrinsic, institutional concerns.

But what about situations where people do not need to interact? What draws people together—even people who might not seem very much alike—to start communicating? Sometimes “comembership” around a common cause such as a video game (*World of Warcraft*), a popular book (*Harry Potter*), or a hobby (beer making) is enough to bring otherwise widely divergent types of people together. Gee describes “affinity spaces” as just such phenomena, defining them as “real world or internet sites or virtual worlds like Second Life—where people interact around a common passion” (Hayes & Gee, 2010). Affinity spaces find their cohesion through something like what Erickson and Shultz called “comembership” with the usual race/class/gender identity categories slipping even more to the background: “In an affinity space, people relate to each other primarily in terms of common interests, endeavors, goals, or practices, not primarily in terms of race, gender, age, disability, or social class” (Hayes & Gee, 2010, p. 188).

In addition, affinity spaces are places where highly diverse forms of knowledge converge: “Affinity space encourages and enables people to use dispersed knowledge, knowledge that is not actually at the site itself, but at other sites.”
So, for Gee, affinity spaces offer ideal sites for learning because individuals pool knowledge that is not shared, negotiating overlap and relevance. Participants are motivated to communicate with each other because they want to learn more about the common interest. In these spaces, even language(s) are often pooled, as when fan-fiction writers use a medley of Japanese, Chinese, and English to convey character and flair in their fiction writing (Black, 2008).

So people are drawn together and motivated to communicate through comembership and shared affinities. As Erickson and Shultz found, counselors align with students’ concerns when they share common ground. As Gee and others have illustrated, once participants in affinity spaces find each other, they also welcome new knowledge into the space, building more common ground. Are these features of communication unique to internet spaces or counseling sessions? Or are these phenomena illustrating something more general about communication and culture?

Henry Jenkins (2006) argues that this collective form of knowledge building is characteristic of late-modern society and has dubbed this form of communication participatory culture. In lieu of other, more traditional, organized groups like nation states or a grade in school (Class of 2012!), participatory culture develops among people with shared interests or goals—such as Star Wars fans, PhD students working on their dissertations, skateboarding-video-makers or people contributing to Wikipedia. Within participatory culture, knowledge and authority are loosely negotiated and even what the group is about can change as members themselves assert changing priorities.

Wikipedia offers an illustration of how participatory culture works: Jimmy Wales, the founder of Wikipedia, has created an infrastructure, but he has very little role in determining the content of the site. The entries that emerge, the information that is in those entries, and the quality and modality of those entries is all determined via voluntary collaboration of the Wikipedia users and producers. What Wikipedia ends up being is a result of participatory culture of those who contribute to it. In participatory culture, the canon of important knowledge is not decided on by an isolated elite, but negotiated among people who are involved in the world, as they express what they already know and what they care about knowing more of.

Drawing on Levy’s (1997) notion of Collective Intelligence, Jenkins (2006) links “the emergence of the new knowledge space [in participatory culture] to the breakdown of geographic constraints on communication, of the declining loyalty of individuals to organized groups, and of the diminished power of nation states to command the exclusive loyalty of their citizens” (p. 137). Through participatory culture, loyalty or popularity or even legitimacy is not received on demand or through a top–down power structure, but earned by providing something creative or new, but still of shared interest to the group.

So, the basic interactional features of comembership, carefully described by Erickson and Shultz, and the “affinity spaces” and “participatory culture” described by Gee and Jenkins all illustrate features of communication that are
inherently and necessarily collective—and, perhaps, characteristic of our late-modern world. Arriving at the right ways of speaking or the important knowledge does not happen through unilateral effort or institutional authority. Rather, people in interaction collaboratively negotiate what counts as knowledge and what are the functional resources for communicating.

The processes of negotiating comembership, entering an affinity space, or engaging in participatory culture, illustrate how individuals find common ground by simultaneously building on commonalities (e.g., common goals for a Wikipedia entry) and by tapping into each other’s diverse backgrounds (e.g., knowledge to create different Wikipedia entries). Moreover, the extent to which people find those points of commonality indicates the extent to which they can communicate with each across other points of difference—building on each other’s communicative repertoires while expanding their own.

**A Repertoire Approach**

Whether in an academic counseling session, on a fan-fiction chat site, or by enhancing a Wikipedia entry, individuals communicate across difference by negotiating or seeking out common ground and, then, creating new shared terrain. To investigate this process of finding common ground in more detail, this book takes a repertoire approach. I call an individual’s resource set a communicative repertoire. The extent to which we can communicate is contingent on the degree to which our repertoires expand, change and overlap with others.

As Erickson and Shultz’s close analysis of talk illustrates, people form alignments in interaction not necessarily by speaking the same native language (e.g., “English” or “Spanish”) or categorizing each other demographically, but when they find some kind of common ground. In this sense, we learn to live side-by-side by expanding our communicative repertoires. As our repertoire gradually shifts to overlap with that of others (including common ways of greeting, joking, gesturing or dressing, for example) we develop a sense of shared belonging. This perspective should lead to rethinking how we encounter “cultural diversity” in any setting—the workplace, a classroom, a family, a neighborhood market, or a local park. Understanding “the other” is not a matter of labeling and demarcating that person’s differences in potentially essentializing or stereotypical ways, but of raising awareness of multiple repertoires and expanding any potential points of communicative overlap.

**A Brief History of the Repertoire Perspective**

Initially, the notion of “repertoire” was a radical concept in linguistics. So, perhaps it makes sense that it emerged in the 1960s, as some linguists felt bolstered to challenge more purist orthodoxies in the interest of carefully observing social life.
During this era, John Gumperz (1964, 1965) began to question linguistic definitions of language. This questioning began when he traveled to India to do linguistic research. There, in a context of massive linguistic variety, he found that individuals habitually used many languages in seemingly free variation. They simply did not orient to the idea that languages should be used in a “pure” form. In his essay, “Language,” (1965) Gumperz drew on these observations to make the point that terms like “Language X” demarcated a useful category for linguists, but not necessarily for people communicating. When the people in an Indian marketplace, for example, were bargaining with other multilingual merchants, they would strategically call on words and phrases from many different local languages to make a sale or negotiate a bargain. Gumperz’s analysis of the Indian marketplace centered on language and a questioning of linguistic description, and he used the term *linguistic repertoire* to describe the range of languages circulating in a community.

Later in the 1960s and in the 1970s, Gumperz took his research even further beyond the goals of decontextualized linguistic description. Seeking to apply his methods for closely examining the nuance of negotiation—methods he developed through his research in the Indian marketplace—he began to examine emergent injustices he perceived in the interactions of Indian English speakers in London (Gumperz, 1978). While these speakers technically had become fluent in the English language, certain features of their talk—for example, intonation and emphasis—often led to miscommunication in crucial gate-keeping interactions—such as job interviews or attempts to access social services. To use the terms Erickson and Shultz coined, these simple features of communication prevented any attempts to find *comembership*—and impeded successful alignment in these high-stakes encounters.

Gumperz called the misunderstandings in these encounters, *crosstalk*, and he attributed prevalent racist attitudes in London to a cumulative build-up of these simple, yet frustrating and pervasive, interactional miscues. But was racism in London contingent on simply these audible miscues? While Gumperz made huge advances in the field of sociolinguistics by drawing attention to these micro-features of interaction that can lead to crosstalk, his analysis neglected some important features of those interactions. His earlier concept of “repertoire” included multiple languages, but he never expanded that concept to include the other features of an interaction that are beyond language—including both those that he identified in *crosstalk* as well as more general features of the context.

So, if the problem of *crosstalk* cannot be attributed exclusively to language, intonation, and stress, what other communicative elements can we hold accountable? The way someone is dressed, the color of their skin, the length of their hair, the way they sit during an interview or what kind of bag they carry their papers in, all may have an effect on how encounters with diversity unfold. Adding to the work of interactional sociolinguists, like Gumperz,
Linguistic Anthropologists have increasingly pushed the boundaries in discovering relevant communicative elements—beyond language—within interaction. As Duranti has written (1994), for example, communicating effectively in a Samoan Kava ceremony involved knowledge of a system of grammar, a range of registers, and cues about spacing and pacing of talk, but also of how seating spots were arranged, what you could wear, the ordering of events, who drank first and last, and even what a person in power should look like (large) and how they should move (slowly and not much). This kind of knowledge is a crucial component of a communicative repertoire. These are also important elements of any interaction that may have gone unanalyzed in Gumperz’ more sociolinguistically focused examination of crosstalk.

So what do the Indian marketplace of the 1960s, Indian English speakers in London in the 1970s, and Samoan Kava ceremonies in the 1980s have to do with communicating in late-modern times? Today’s increasingly multilingual schools and cities are in many ways analogous to the Indian marketplaces Gumperz described over 40 years ago. Gumperz’ use of the term repertoire, the recognition that a community may contain a huge diversity of functionally relevant linguistic resources, illuminates the complex communicative needs in today’s society—not simply a unique characteristic of multilingual India. As described above, most urban high schools feature dozens of home languages—and students increasingly use them with each other. Additionally, the late-modern massive “breakdown of constraints on communication”—through transnational movement and the internet—and the participatory culture it fosters (Jenkins, 2006) have led to a proliferation of multilingualism, even in monolingual strongholds like the United States. Internet communication and increased transnational movement have also meant that people moving across language boundaries are motivated to maintain languages of multiple countries—as they could be speaking with a teacher in English at one moment and Skyping with their Moroccan mother in French and Arabic the next.

Moreover, many encounters between English speakers include, like those Gumperz recorded in London in the 1970s, at least one participant for whom English is not a first language. Today, in fact, most English speakers in the world are not native speakers—outnumbering native speakers 3:1 (Crystal, 2003). Some linguists have even suggested that the “native” speakers are the ones who now risk being misunderstood unless they accommodate to the norms of other, international Englishes around them (Graddol, 1997). Given these realities, the nuances of communication that Gumperz began to describe in London are, perhaps, even more relevant to the kind of diverse encounters people have today. The conditions may also be ripe for crosstalk of the kind Gumperz described in 1970s’ London.

So, communication today is increasingly multilingual, and like Indian English Speakers and Native Londoners, even those speaking the “same language” do so in widely varying ways. And, understanding communication these days
goes beyond simply describing languages people are using. Varied expectations for routines, gestures, ways of dressing, etc., also contribute to communicative complexity. For example, while many Samoans have moved to Los Angeles and speak primarily English, some of the routines Duranti observed in Samoa in the 1980s took place many years later, in new but recognizable forms, among transnational Samoans in exurban Los Angeles (cf. Duranti & Reynolds, 2000). These routines have become part of the communicative repertoire of many transplanted Samoans. Similarly, when people communicate via the web, they have developed routines that involve photos, video, music, emoticons, and other non-linguistic forms of expression that serve as resources for communication.

In summary, multiple languages, multiple ways of speaking the “same” language, and many features beyond language can serve as part of an individual’s communicative repertoire and function to create communicative alignment or crosstalk in interaction today. While Gumperz was using the term linguistic repertoire to describe the languages circulating in one community, today the use of “repertoire” has become increasingly common as a way of describing how individuals deploy other modes of communication in addition to their multiple languages.

Educational researchers have also begun to use the term “repertoire” as a way to describe the diverse forms of knowledge that students bring into the classroom. This repertoire perspective allows us to rethink classrooms as affinity spaces and sites of participatory culture rather than top-down authoritarian regimes of standardized knowledge. Imagine, for example, the variety of Wikipedia entries that could be built by a high school classroom with kids from 12 different countries and speaking as many different languages.

Once schools and classrooms are re-imagined as affinity space and sites of participatory culture, the multiple repertoires circulating in those classrooms become valuable resources rather than liabilities. Gutiérrez and Rogoff emphasize how looking at a repertoire of communicative resources (they use the phrase “repertoires of practice”) allows educators to focus on the “benefits of knowing about the histories and valued practices of cultural groups rather than trying to teach prescriptively according to broad, under-examined generalities about groups” (2003, p. 20). Rather than seeing someone as different, based on race, class, gender, or country of origin, one might see points of similarity, based on other points of comembership, or shared interests of the type that develop in Gee-like affinity spaces. Rather than identifying individuals as part of one monolithic different “Culture,” people can see points of commonality and shared interests, as well as the wealth of collective knowledge in a diverse classroom by contributing to a shared, “participatory culture” of that classroom.

The term communicative repertoire will be used throughout this volume to refer to the collection of ways individuals use language and other means of communication (gestures, dress, posture, accessories) to function effectively in the
multiple communities in which they participate (Rymes, 2010). One’s repertoire can include not only multiple languages, dialects, and registers in the institutionally defined sense, but also gesture, dress, posture, and even knowledge of communicative routines, familiarity with types of food or drink, and mass media references including phrases, dance moves, and recognizable intonation patterns that circulate via actors, musicians, and other superstars (Rymes, 2012). So, an individual’s repertoire can be seen as something like an accumulation of archeological layers. As one moves through life, one accumulates an abundance of experiences and images, and one also selects from those experiences, choosing elements from a repertoire that seem to communicate in the moment, developing a potential for comembership.

The Diversity Principle

Perhaps one of the most important reasons for taking a repertoire approach is that it provides a practical pathway for engaging with diversity—as a researcher, a teacher, a student, and most basically, as a person. This is because a repertoire perspective accommodates the basic recognition that, these days, in times of massive breakdown of the usual geographic and cultural constraints, it is less useful than ever to view kinds of communication as free-standing markers of some general category type (“typical college kid … Asian … woman … Midwesterner …”). Instead, communicative elements circulate so widely these days and are taken up in such diverse ways, that it is hard to use such broad generalizations to understand what is going in.

While some communication theorists have speculated that globalization and mass media lead to homogenization of cultural elements, it turns out quite the contrary. Massive circulation of language and messages has not led to homogenization of language and communication, but to a massive diversification. This is captured in what I call “The Diversity Principle”:

The Diversity Principle: The more widely circulated a communicative element is, the more highly diverse the interactions with it will be.

To illustrate this principle in action, consider the Hindi/Urdu word *Jaan-e-man*. In a Bollywood film, the hearthrob might use this word (loosely translated, “sweetheart”) to refer lovingly to his girlfriend. But now, Hindi-speaking Bollywood fans live in Philadelphia (among many other cities, globally), and in one English classroom they used it jokingly among themselves. Soon, other students (non–Hindi-speakers) began to use it too. “Jaan-e-man” was no longer being used as a term of endearment, like “sweetheart,” but more as a way of semi-ironically getting someone’s attention, as in “Jaan-e-man, hand me a computer.” Now, given that *Jaan-e-man* and Bollywood fans have circulated across the globe via mass media and emigration, the way people use *Jaan-e-man* is likely to
continue to expand to more social groupings and function anew in more diverse interactions. The new uses of Jaan-e-man are not incorrect. They are simply new. And, in illustration of the Diversity Principle, people are not robotically repeating Bollywood phrases, they are embedding them in highly diverse interactions, creating unique nuances of meaning and functionality.

As Chapters 4 (on YouTube-circulated phrases, dance steps and iconography) and 5 (on YouTube narratives) illustrate, repertoire elements such as ways of talking, gesturing, or moving, and ways of telling a story, circulate swiftly across cyberspace, embedding exponentially in different social contexts and ways of understanding. Ever-morphing YouTube videos illustrate, in time-lapse form, the same processes of re-embedding that went on with “Jaan-e-man” in a classroom, over the course of months. Thus, a repertoire approach and the Diversity Principle give us a new way of exploring communicative complexity. Rather than linking words and ways of talking to generalized types, we now have the conceptual apparatus to trace those words and other communicative elements back to a history of diverse use and lived experience.

Everyday Metacommentary: An Approach to Analyzing Repertoire

Given the Diversity Principle and the ever-multiplying repertoire diversity across individuals, how do people in interaction know which languages, dialects, registers, modalities, media references, or intonation patterns count as relevant? When we define proficiency by a language test and measure it by the individual, it is easy to know what to look at for answers. But when communicating becomes a matter of “repertoire” and relevant knowledge is emergent in interactions, by what mechanisms do we measure the relative efficacy of any interactional move? One important mechanism—the one that we will use to analyze repertoire in this book—is metacommentary.

In any interaction, metacommentary signals an understanding of what a sign means without arbitrarily systematizing communicative elements, but by pointing to that sign’s situated communicative value. So, sometimes, people will draw attention to the language being spoken—Spanish, German, or French. At other times, and, I will argue, increasingly in our late-modern era, metacommentary is subtler and the repertoire elements on which it comments are more fine-grained than simple nation-state language categories.

To begin with a not-so-subtle example, let us pay a visit to Geno’s Steaks. Located on the edge of the Italian Market in South Philadelphia, Geno’s Steaks generated national media attention in 2006 through metacommentary on language, posting signs around the front windows that said “This is AMERICA: WHEN ORDERING ‘SPEAK ENGLISH.’” The metacommentary in this sign makes it explicit that code, in the sense of nation-state bounded linguistically distinct code, is the object of attack. Geno’s did not specify what kind of English
should be spoken, or whether the person could have an accent, or what people
should wear when they come to his restaurant. They just specified that they want
“English.”

Everyday metacommentary is often not as explicitly negative as Geno’s’ sign
nor does it always refer to languages. Another common type of metacommentary
is on how someone speaks. As will be discussed in Chapter 3, “accented speech”
often evokes commentary, as when someone asks, after hearing a few unfamil-
liar pronunciations, “Where are you from?” Or, when non-native speakers are
repeatedly asked to repeat themselves, even when they are speaking grammati-
cally well-formed sentences.

But non-native speakers are not the only people whose “accent” draws com-
mentary. Often, varieties of a single language receive metacommentary, and as
such, become focal. For example, while Geno’s did not specify the kind of English
people should speak at the restaurant, a news article about the controversy pointed
out that “native Philadelphians” speak a certain way, and need to use certain kinds
of words to be understood when ordering a cheesesteak, emphasizing that Geno’s
was not asking that patrons speak “the King’s English”:

> Of course, it’s not as if native Philadelphians speak the King’s English either.
> A Philadelphian might order a cheesesteak by saying something like, “Yo,
gimme a cheesesteak wit, will youse?” (“Wit,” or “with,” means with fried
> onions.)

(http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,198757,00.
html#ixzz1xDFqjb7b (retrieved 6/8/2012))

The everyday metacommentary in this news article emphasized that, when
ordering at Geno’s, more subtle repertoire elements are involved than simply
whether “English” or “Spanish” is being spoken. There is also a certain chees-
estake ordering technique in play here that involves a specific pronunciation
(“wit” for “with”) and even special vocabulary (“Wit” means with fried onions;
“Youse” means “you.”). So not only languages, but also the way people pro-
nounce them can be objects of everyday metacommentary. And, when people in
interaction comment on these features of talk, they raise everyone’s awareness of
their importance.

One variety of metacomment—the ironic remark—is probably the most
widespread form of communicative metacommentary these days. While ironic
metacommentary can function as mockery, it can also display many other forms
of appreciation for the repertoire range people have at their disposal, and their
knowing use of it.

Ben Rampton, for example, has written about how students of German as a
foreign language in a London high school ironically use German or “mock Ger-
man” as he calls it, when they leave that class, to joke around in the school hall-
ways and in other subject classes (transcript adapted from Rampton, 2006):
MOCK GERMAN

Mr. N: as I’ve said before I get a bit fed up with saying Shshsh
John:  LOUDER
Mr. N: you’re doing your SATs now
Hanif:  VIEL LAUTER SPRECHEN VIEL LAUTER SPRECHEN
         (translation from German: “speak much louder”)
Mr. N:  (emphatic) sshh
John:  (smile voice) lauter spricken whatever that is

Here, “German” is being used as a language, but to ironically enact a serious and forceful “German” persona, delivering a command directly in opposition to the teacher’s “shshsh”. Clearly, in this instance, the totality of The German Language as a nation-state bound code is less important than the use of a few German tokens, used here by Hanif to ironically enact a flagrantly unbounded classroom persona.

This type of irony often layers on top of other forms of metacommentary. Just as speaking another language can bring out ironic performances, ways of speaking can also evoke ironic commentary. The news story about Geno’s Steaks, for example, brought irony into play by suggesting that probably nobody ordering a cheesesteak in South Philadelphia is speaking “the King’s English.” Ironic use of address terms is also common: My neighbor calls me a very formal “Dr. Rymes,” for example, as she sees me taking out the trash, or my 13-year-old son urges me to “Relax, homeslice,” when I am trying to rush him out the door to school. These forms of address could be interpreted as mockery, but they are also ways of doing affiliation or sharing hilarity to break up life’s inevitable routines.

At times, relentless irony may even seem cynical—perhaps sending a message like, “I’ve seen it all, and we’re all sell-outs. Therefore I take nothing seriously.” However, these days, ironic embodiment of a huge range of repertoires has become so common that it can also function to send a message of appreciation and communicative awareness—“I use many ways of speaking and I have witnessed even more. Now I am displaying one of them in a new way because I enjoy how it sounds/looks/feels and the effects it has on other people.” Irony, then, rather than being a cynical stance, can be a way of appreciating the vast communicative complexity of contemporary life. Perhaps most accurately, Linda Hutcheon (1994) has described irony as something that “just happens.” Rarely do people archly pre-determine the intentions of their ironic comments. Rather, ironic meanings unfold (or fail to!), sometimes unpredictably, based on how much and what types of repertoire overlap, or comembership is in play.

The examples given here begin to illustrate the potentially limitless communicative layers that exist in an interaction, and the metacommentary that makes those layers more visible to researchers and more meaningful and relevant to anyone communicating—not simply a pile of experiences that nobody understands.
An individual’s “roots” lie not only in some pre-ordained heritage language or culture, but also in the much more random life elements that an individual encounters and absorbs. The meaning of those experiences is often made visible to self and others through metacommentary.

Moreover, metacommentary, like participatory culture, seems to be increasingly prevalent in late modernity. In fact, sites of participatory culture, such as Wikipedia and YouTube, foster the proliferation of metacommentary. Messages on Wikipedia like “this is a stub” metacomment on the type of information in an entry and the need for more. As will be discussed in Chapter 4, videos on YouTube are, primarily, metacommenting on other videos. Often the “original” is no longer identifiable, but lost in a string of video parodies that metacomment on it. In face-to-face interaction as well, metacommentary is rampant. Awareness of ways of speaking and a diversity of communicative routines is also the crux of many comedy acts, YouTube comedians like Kevin Wu, and even feature-length movies such as those of Sasha Baron Cohen.

So, as our communicative repertoires proliferate, so do our means for commenting on them. Through metacommentary, participants give a local order and relevance to the proliferation of communicative means in ways that far surpass simple categories like those evoked in a sign that says “SPEAK ENGLISH.”

Review of Chapters in the Book

The next four chapters in this book will each describe elements of communicative repertoire in terms of the method and theory outlined in this first chapter. Chapter 2, Multilingualisms, will describe how the term “language” in the traditional sense breaks down when we look more closely at instances of multilingual—or presumably monolingual—talk. Chapters 3 through 5, on Sounds, Mass Media and Popular Culture, and Storytelling, illustrate how “multilingualism” is just one resource of many that individuals draw on from their communicative repertoire. In a massively multilingual and multicultural world, in which people are often communicating across language difference, often online, communication draws on a wider range of resources.

Chapter 6, Youthy Repertoires and Adult Repertoires illustrates how repertoire elements associated with youth and hipness and are not straightforwardly linked to demographic features like “age,” or even roles like “teacher” or “student.” Given the diverse make-up of classrooms today, youthy repertoires deployed by a teacher in his forties may be lost on a student in her teens.

Chapter 7, Everyday Encounters with Diversity, will illustrate how these repertoire elements combine in daily encounters, as individuals discover points of commonality, or misunderstanding, friction, or simply indifference. Here, I illustrate how the performance itself—the artful deployment of one’s repertoire and the awareness of repertoire brought to light through metacommentary—brings one individual’s communicative repertoire into communion with diverse others.
Finally, Chapter 8, *Communicating Beyond Language*, will bring home the book’s central theme—language does not simply map onto other categories like race or culture, but is part of a medley of signifiers that people have available in their repertoires and that are deployed variably across situations. This chapter sums up the implications of a repertoire perspective, providing a new framework for multicultural research and engagement. I will conclude by explaining not only how this approach makes social science sense, by affording more accurate representations of identity and communication, but also, how this approach makes ethical sense by sharpening our perceptions and appreciation of other ways of being human.