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Linguistic anthropology: the study of language as a non-neutral medium

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Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentions; it is populated – overpopulated – with the intentions of others. Expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one's own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process. (Bakhtin 1981: 294)

3.1 Introduction

Linguistic anthropology was born in the late nineteenth century out of early efforts in the United States to document North American Indian languages and establish anthropology as a professional discipline dedicated to the holistic study of what makes humans distinct from the rest of the animal world. For the German-born Franz Boas, who played a key role in the shaping of North American anthropology, the empirical study of unwritten aboriginal languages was just as important as (and in some respects even more important than) the study of human remains, dwellings, past and current rituals, classificatory systems, and artistic productions. From its inception then, linguistic anthropology arose as one of the four subfields of the US tradition of anthropology, with the other three being physical (now biological) anthropology, archaeology, and ethnology (now sociocultural anthropology). This conceptual and institutional organization is found nowhere else but in Canada.

Boas' fascination with American Indian languages played a major role in his decision to leave the field of geography and embrace anthropology. Sponsored by John Wesley Powell at the Bureau of Ethnology (later renamed the Bureau of American Ethnology or BAE), Boas taught himself

linguistic methods and managed to produce and encourage first-rate grammatical descriptions of the native languages of North America (e.g. Boas 1911; Stocking 1974). He used his knowledge of Kwakiutl and other Native American languages to argue against a Eurocentric view of grammatical categories (Boas 1911: 35).

Through Boas and his students, linguistics as a distinct field in the United States became at first almost indistinguishable from the study of grammars and vocabularies of American Indian languages (Mithun 2004). This fact alone may explain the stereotype – very common until a few decades ago – of the linguistic anthropologist as someone primarily dedicated to the study of the sound system and morphology of some "exotic language" and uninterested in theoretical issues, with the exception of the so-called "linguistic relativity" issue (see below).

However, over the course of the last 120 years, the range of topics and issues covered by linguists within anthropology departments and by other researchers interested in language from an anthropological perspective has been, in fact, empirically and theoretically rich (Duranti 1997a, 2001a, 2001b, 2004). Linguistic anthropologists have made important contributions to our knowledge of many of the languages of the world and have reshaped our understanding of what it means to be a speaker of a language. But the wealth of empirical and theoretical contributions made by linguistic anthropologists is often hard to grasp for those outside the field.

In an earlier article (Duranti 2003), in order to make sense of the diverse approaches and contributions within linguistic anthropology, I proposed thinking of the discipline in terms of three distinct paradigms. In this chapter, I carve a different path. Here I take on the challenge of conceptualizing the field of linguistic anthropology in terms of one general criterion: *ontological commitment*. I will argue that despite considerable differences across generations and schools of thought, linguistic anthropologists share some core ideas about a small set of essential properties of language, all of which are centered upon one basic assumption, namely, that *language is a non-neutral medium*. The ways in which this basic assumption has been interpreted and transformed into particular research projects gives linguistic anthropology its unique identity within the social sciences and the humanities.

3.2 Ontological commitments

If we understand the ontology of language to be a theory about what it is that makes language into the kind of entity that it is, then we can use the term *ontological commitment* to mean the programmatic interest to pursue topics and questions that are generated or justified by a particular ontology of language.

If we examine the full spectrum of disciplines interested in human communication, we find a variety of both explicit and implicit assumptions that researchers make about the essential qualities of language. For example, an assumption commonly made by many authors is that language is designed primarily to serve the purpose of communication. A less common assumption is that the essential property of language is not its communicative function but, rather, *recursion*[1] (Hauser, Chomsky & Fitch 2002). In this chapter I focus on three essential properties of language that are usually assumed by linguistic anthropologists: (1) language is a code for representing experience, (2) language is a form of social organization, and (3) language is a system of differentiation. To each of these three properties corresponds a different ontological commitment, but when we examine the contributions made by linguistic anthropologists across these three commitments, we find that they all stem from a higher-order ontological commitment, namely, a commitment to language as a non-neutral medium.

3.3 Commitment to the study of language as a non-neutral code

It is common to think of language as a sign system, that is, a system of correspondences between expressions and meanings. The expressions may be particular sequential combinations of linguistic sounds (e.g. /si:t/), written symbols (e.g. *seat*), or gestures (e.g. the signs used by the Deaf in particular communities to represent 'seat'), organized in particular sequences. In this view, linguistic expressions *stand for* meanings or they *carry* meanings. Exactly what "meanings" are or how they could be described is not something that is agreed upon by all linguistic anthropologists. Some analyze meanings in terms of intentions, others in terms of conventions. In some cases, meaning is seen as something formed in a speaker's mind, to be captured by the notion of cognitive frame. In other cases, meaning is seen as an emergent structure, an interactional achievement or an embodied predisposition. It would be impossible to get all linguistic anthropologists to agree upon one definition of meaning. At the same time, I think they would all concur that by linguistically encoding human experience, speakers submit to particular ways of categorizing and conceptualizing the world. As we shall see, exactly what this means varies across authors and theoretical implications. The extent to which or the contexts within which the encoding possibilities offered by each language guide or constrain our thinking and doing remains an important and yet still largely unresolved empirical question.

3.3.1 Classificatory biases
The idea that in using a given language speakers are forced into interpretations of the world that they cannot quite control dates at least as

far back as the writings of Johann Gottfried Herder and the diplomat and linguist Wilhelm von Humboldt (see Bauman & Briggs 2003: Ch. 5). Humboldt provided one of the first clear statements on the relationship between language and worldview, coupled with the suspicion that one might never be able to be completely free from the worldview of one's native language:

> Each tongue draws a circle about the people to whom it belongs, and it is possible to leave this circle only by simultaneously entering that of another people. Learning a foreign language ought hence to be the conquest of a new standpoint in the previously prevailing cosmic attitude of the individual. In fact, it is so to a certain extent, inasmuch as every language contains the entire fabric of concepts and the conceptual approach of a portion of humanity. But this achievement is not complete, because one always carries over into a foreign tongue to a greater or lesser degree one's own cosmic viewpoint – indeed one's personal linguistic pattern. (Humboldt [1836] 1971: 39–40)

It is very likely that Boas' way of looking at American Indian languages was influenced by this German anthropological tradition (Bunzl 1996). Without adopting the nationalist discourse that characterized the writings of Herder and Humboldt – for both of whom each language expresses the "spirit of a people" or "of a nation" – Boas pointed out that languages differ in the ways they *routinely* classify experience or divide up the natural and cultural world that humans inhabit. For example, whereas in English the idea of WATER is implied by completely different and etymologically unrelated words such as *liquid, rain, dew, river, lake, brook*, etc., in American Indian languages, Boas pointed out, the words for those very same referents may all share a root or stem meaning something like 'water' or 'liquid,' thereby making their common nature an explicit part of the lexicon (1911: 25). Similarly, some categories that speakers of European languages assume to be a necessary part of nouns, like, for example, number or gender, may not be encoded in other languages. As Boas wrote, "It is entirely immaterial to the Kwakiutl whether he says, *There is a house* or *There are houses* … the idea of singularity or plurality must be understood either by the context or by the addition of a special adjective" (1911: 37).

Although Boas did not claim that these differences in the linguistic encoding of experience have an impact on what speakers think or say (we need to get to the next generation of linguistic anthropologists for explicit statements about this issue), he did recognize the influence of the sounds of our native language on the ways in which we can hear and appreciate sound distinctions used by speakers of other languages. In a short but influential article entitled "On Alternating Sounds," Boas (1889) pointed out that when listening to the sounds of a language that is new to them, even expert fieldworkers (as he was) are not immune from the influence of their native language, as well as from the influence of other

languages they previously studied, on their ability to perceive sound distinctions they are not familiar with.

3.3.2 The principle of linguistic relativity

Boas' discussion of the influence of one language on the ability of an individual to hear subtle differences in the sounds of another language is the first explicit statement of the ontological commitment to thinking of language as a non-neutral medium. His student Edward Sapir expanded this line of thought to include the idea that there are unconscious patterns hidden in the arbitrary ways in which languages classify the world and that these patterns, like the scales used in Western music, establish the range of choices that are available to us for expressing our thoughts and getting things done (Sapir 1927). However, as John Lucy (1992a) explains, Sapir never fully developed these ideas or a method for testing their implications. This task was left to his student Benjamin Lee Whorf, an engineer working as an inspector for an insurance company, who provided more precise guidelines for establishing in which ways language, thought, and behavior are interconnected. Whorf unequivocally stated that by speaking a given language, we are "parties to an agreement" to organize experience in the way in which it is codified by that language and that "we cannot talk at all except by subscribing to the organization and classification of data which the agreement decrees" (1956: 214). It is on these premises that Whorf articulated the principle of *linguistic relativity*:

> no individual is free to describe nature with absolute impartiality but is constrained to certain modes of interpretation even while he thinks himself most free. The person most nearly free in such respects would be a linguist familiar with very many widely different linguistic systems. As yet no linguist is in any such position. We are thus introduced to a new principle of relativity, which holds that all observers are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe, unless their linguistic backgrounds are similar, or can in some way be calibrated. (Whorf 1956: 214)

One way in which the principle of linguistic relativity operates is through the use of analogy. For example, having the same word for a variety of objects or experiences encourages speakers to categorize those referents as the same or as experientially related to one another.

As suggested by Lucy (1992a, 1996), a superficial reading of Whorf's writings could easily lead to questionable generalizations based on flawed logic or defective methods. Some of the claims often associated with Whorf or attributed to him are also factually wrong, including the infamous example that Eskimos have a very high number of words for 'snow.' Not only is this not true (Martin 1986), but even if it were true, it

would not say much about the power of words over their speakers' perception of the world. It would tell us only that languages vary in how rich their terminology is for specific domains of experience. The issue is whether the range of semantic distinctions recognized in the vocabulary of a language has an *effect* on its speakers' ability to recognize distinctions that are not present in their language.

A number of experimental studies have addressed this issue over the years with mixed results that have generated a number of controversies regarding methods and epistemological assumptions. After a careful review of the existing evidence on linguistic relativity, Lucy (1992b) produced some compelling results through experiments that became a model for subsequent studies carried out by fieldworkers at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics (Levinson 2003). Lucy (1992b) tested whether the fact that Yucatec, a Mayan language, marks number (plural) much less often than English influences Yucatec speakers to pay less attention to number than English speakers. The results showed that this was indeed the case. He also tested whether the fact that Yucatec – like Kwakiutl (see above) – tends to classify nouns in terms of substance (e.g. nouns tend to have classifiers that indicate the type of material or substance involved) and English tends to classify in terms of shape (e.g. *river* and *lake* highlight the difference in shape but not the similarity in substance, i.e. water) had an impact on speakers' attention to substance or space. A series of experiments supported Lucy's prediction about a different bias in the two groups of speakers. "Yucatec-speakers showed a strong tendency to group objects on the basis of common material composition and English-speakers showed a strong tendency to group objects on the basis of common shape" (Lucy 1992b: 157).

These results, together with the results of similar experiments that were carried out in the 1990s (Gumperz & Levinson 1996; Levinson 2003), have provided badly needed evidence to counteract the harsh criticism and ridicule expressed toward Whorf and his followers by some formal grammarians (Pinker 1994; Baker 1996).

3.3.3 Habituation

Another aspect of the Boas–Sapir–Whorf connection that is important for the commitment to the study of language as a non-neutral medium is the idea that our language is a *habit*. First, this means that, as Whorf (1956: 138) argues, our language is for us *non est disputandum*, that is, something we do not question. Second, it means that we experience language use as something automatic, that is, as "highly probable" or "virtually unavoidable" (Hanks 1996: 238). Habituation includes a routine and unconscious monitoring of the position of our body, which constitutes what the German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1989) called "the zero point of orientation" and is thus crucial for understanding how spatial

and temporal deixis (e.g. *here, there, now, then*) functions in any given language (Hanks 1990).

There have been two main trends in dealing with the habitual quality of language use. In one trend, the routine aspects of linguistic encoding are made sense of in terms of *mental representations*. A popular concept in this approach has been the notion of schema (plural: *schemata*), an abstract construct with some basic, sketchy elements that allow for the recognition and interpretation of a potentially infinite number of cases (D'Andrade 1995: Ch. 6). Schemata are sometimes conceived of as involving scenes or part-whole relationships that provide background information that is crucial for understanding what is not being made explicit. For example, the schema for going out for dinner in the USA minimally includes a restaurant, a certain number of people (which cannot be too high otherwise it becomes a different event, e.g. a banquet), a range of menu choices, a price, a transaction in which a bill is requested, provided, and paid, etc. This explains why when someone says to a friend *I went out for dinner last night*, the friend can ask questions about who went, to which restaurant, what food was ordered, and how much it cost. The availability of this information can be explained by the activation of the "going out for dinner" schema. Schemata are highly cultural, that is, specific to a given community. Even within the USA, the schema for going out for dinner in a large metropolitan area might be different from going out for dinner in a small rural community.

A second and quite different approach to habituation could be described through the notion of *habitus*, already understood in medieval philosophy as derived from Aristotle's notion of *hexis* and meaning 'disposition' (e.g. in Duns Scotus' writings; see Vos 2006). The concept was later adopted by Edmund Husserl, who used it at the beginning of the twentieth century to mean "*habitual modes of behavior* ... acquired peculiarities (e.g. the habit of drinking a glass of wine in the evening)" (1989: 289). These habitual ways of acting constituted for Husserl "the total style and habitus of the subject" (1989: 290), a particular kind of *practical knowledge* connecting a person with familiar objects (e.g. tools) and activities. It is a way of being that is experienced passively, whereby I find myself acting in the same way again and again. In so doing I recognize myself as the same person, over time (Husserl 1960: 66–67).

A closely related notion of habitus was made popular in the social sciences by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1977a), who borrowed from phenomenology but was also critical of it (Throop & Murphy 2002).[2] Bourdieu reframed the notion of habitus as a system of dispositions, "that is, virtualities, potentialities, eventualities" (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992: 135) that operate within particular "fields" or historically determined forms of social organizations (e.g. academia, the law, the movie industry, state bureaucracy) and must be understood with reference to such fields. Thus, "the powerful producer," the "demanding director," or "the

unreasonable star," for example, must be understood within the context of the contemporary movie industry in the USA as a "field."

Transferred to the analysis of language, this approach allows us to view language itself as a set of unconscious dispositions rather than rules, which include attitudes toward particular linguistic choices (Hanks 2005). For Bourdieu (1991), these choices must be understood within particular sociohistorical conditions of domination or power asymmetries. In exhibiting a certain regional or class accent or in choosing a particular lexical description, we are involved in the reproduction of a communicative system that is anything but neutral. For example, Bourdieu saw the symbolic capital provided by the ability to use a given dialect as directly linked to the access that social agents have to particular institutional resources (e.g. who is accepted to certain schools or to certain professions).

Ochs, Solomon and Sterponi (2005) argue that a given habitus can be limiting in terms of the range of new communicative situations to which people can adapt. In particular, they suggested that Euro-American habitual ways of communicating with children, which include "face-to-face body orientation, speech as the primary semiotic medium for the child, and caregivers' slowed speech tempo and profuse praise" (p. 573) may make it difficult to find effective ways of communicating with children who have certain kinds of neuro-developmental conditions such as severe autism.

Implicit in this line of work is that the notion of habitus has become associated with a conceptualization of language as a practice that is quite different from the ways in which language has been conceived of in the literature on linguistic relativity as discussed above. In this new perspective, which characterizes what I have elsewhere called the "third paradigm" in linguistic anthropology, language is viewed as being composed of more than just lexicon and grammar. It also includes communicative resources such as prosody, tempo, volume, gestures, body posture, writing tools and conventions, and visualization (see, e.g., Goodwin 2000; Finnegan 2002).

3.3.4 Overcoming the linguistic bias

An important question implicitly raised by the vast body of literature on language as a non-neutral medium for representing experience is whether it implies that speakers could never overcome whatever biases or predispositions are implicit in the language to which they were socialized as a child. I believe that there are theoretical and empirical grounds to answer unequivocally no to this question.

Theoretically speaking, there are two properties of language as a human faculty that provide us with the means to overcome, at least under certain special circumstances, the linguistic biases that we inherit

or assume by the very act of adopting a particular language (in the broad sense mentioned above). One property is *reflexivity*, that is, humans' ability to reflect upon their own actions, including language use. Reflexivity is a fundamental property of the human condition that includes the ability to reflect on the meaning of our actions and to see ourselves through the eyes of an Other. The first ability is implied in Husserl's (1931) notion of "bracketing" of our everyday experience and in any kind of problem-solving, including the mundane problem-solving found in collaborative storytelling (Ochs, Smith & Taylor 1989). The second ability is presupposed in Hegel's notion of "double consciousness" (Hegel ([1807] 1967: 251; see also Du Bois [1903] 1986: 3), in Husserl's notions of intersubjectivity (Husserl 1960), and in subsequent developments in European and North American philosophy (e.g. Heidegger 1962; Merleau-Ponty 1962; Taylor 1991).

Reflexivity is routinely manifested through language (Lucy 1993), as shown by the fact that the language faculty includes a metalanguage faculty, that is, the possibility of making language itself an object of discussion and speculation (Silverstein 2001). We ordinarily use language to talk about language (*That was a great speech! I am not sure what you mean by "democracy"*) and all natural-historical languages offer a variety of ways of framing reported speech (e.g. *I said "no"; I said that I didn't want to do it; I said "I don't want to do it"*). Reflexive speech is a crucial resource for problem-solving and for moral evaluation.

The second property of language that helps us overcome linguistic biases is the ongoing nature of language socialization (Ochs & Schieffelin 1984). The fact that we continue to be receptive to new socializing agents and activities in our adult life is something that is often ignored when people talk in terms of worldview or other concepts that are meant to capture the language–culture connection. New life experiences continually affect our ways of seeing, hearing, and doing. We not only have the ability and the chance to acquire new habits, but we also have the opportunity to reflect on our past, current, and potential ways of being. The temporal quality of our social life implies an inner life of reflection in which what we are now can be seen from the point of view of what we might have been and from the point of view of what we might in fact become. This temporally unfolding "inner life" is often expressed through speech and other symbolic means.

Empirically speaking, there are observable conditions that show how ordinary people can and do move in and out of sociohistorically determined and interpretable ways of speaking. For example, many children in the world grow up multilingual and therefore must manage different ways of representing experience. These children are more likely to become aware of the differences in how languages classify experience and favor certain ways of thinking, feeling, and acting. Adults can also learn a new language and sometimes even think in their second (or third)

language, showing that one can adopt other ways of speaking and thinking later in life. Under special circumstances, which need more attention from researchers, we can also train ourselves (or be trained by others) to become aware of the sociocultural and political implications of our ways of speaking. While recognizing the difficulty of overcoming communicative habits, we must not be blind to those cases in which individuals do manage to change. For example, while making their general points about the limits of the habitus, Ochs, Solomon, and Sterponi (2005) examine the case of a mother in the USA who managed to overcome her previous communicative habitus and acquire a new one in order to communicate with her autistic child.

Speakers can devise new linguistic practices (including new expressions) to overcome prejudice or other negative social attitudes that might be embedded in the language they have been speaking or writing. This is evident in the current movement to change the default use of the masculine pronoun *he* in English and the increase in the adoption of the plural *they*. In some cases, the experience of reading an article about the racist implications of certain linguistic choices can also have an impact on individuals and their language habits – this has been true for some readers of Jane Hill's (2001a) discussion of the negative stereotyping implicit in the use of Spanish words like *macho* in the midst of English sentences.

The above discussion suggests that if we want to overcome language biases, we need a double commitment. On the one hand, we need to move beyond the naïve view that by simply making people aware of their language habits, they will be able to get them to change them or that speakers can easily become aware of the social and cultural implications of their language habits. We know that such habits are strong and resistant to change for both personal and institutional reasons. Giving them up requires particular social circumstances and individual life experiences and skills. On the other hand, we also need to overcome the deterministic, fatalistic, and cynical version of linguistic relativity, whereby our language is indeed our "prison" from which we cannot escape. This is not empirically true and our task as researchers is to better understand the contexts under which this happens.

3.4 Commitment to the study of language as a form of social organization

An intellectual revolution took place in the 1950s and early 1960s regarding how language was conceptualized and studied. After the publication of two posthumous works of two philosophers – Ludwig Wittgenstein's (1953) unfinished *Philosophical Investigations* and J. L. Austin's (1975) lectures *How To Do Things With Words* – an increasing number of scholars began to see language predominantly as action rather than mostly (or

exclusively) as a code to express ideas or represent events. Austin argued that when we use words we are engaged in a "field of actions" (1975: 76) and we must distinguish the "meaning" (sense and reference) from the "force" of an utterance, that is, what an utterance is meant to accomplish or, informally speaking, do. Wittgenstein conceptualized language use as a "form of life" and said that the meaning of words must be understood within particular activities (Duranti 1997a: Ch. 7). To illustrate this approach, he used the notion of "language game," to be understood as a primitive or basic way of using language. Examples of language games include elliptical exchanges such as that between two builders while involved in physical labor (e.g. *slab! Mortar!*) and a series of utterances such as (a) *all men are mortal*, (b) *Socrates is a man*; and (c) *Therefore Socrates is mortal* used by logicians to argue about meaning and inference. For Wittgenstein, no one language game is more important than the others for understanding how language works.

The idea that language is not only a way of encoding knowledge but also a way of acting in the world had already been articulated by other scholars before the publications of Wittgenstein's and Austin's writings. In anthropology, the Polish-born, British anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski published an important essay in 1923 where he claimed that among "primitive" people (e.g. the Trobrianders he lived with and studied during World War I), language was more an instrument for action than for intellectual reflection. He later revised his position to claim that it was true for all people that "[w]ords are part of action and they are equivalents to actions" (Malinowski 1935: 9).

Building on these insights and in interaction with a number of innovative scholars (e.g. Kenneth Burke, Erving Goffman, John Gumperz, William Labov), starting in the mid-1960s Dell Hymes began to alter the object of study of earlier generations of linguistic anthropologists by shifting the attention from "language" (a system, e.g. a grammar) to "speaking" (an activity, e.g. telling a story). Building on Roman Jakobson's (1960) notion of the "speech event," Hymes initiated a new way of doing linguistic fieldwork and collecting linguistic data. The choice was no longer between writing grammars (for linguists) and writing ethnographies (for cultural or social anthropologists). It was instead to write about what is left out of both, namely, *the ways in which our ways of speaking organize our social life.*

A crucial concept employed in this effort was the notion of the speech event understood as an event that is predominantly defined by the use of language (Hymes 1972b). Examples of speech events abound: greetings, compliments, requests, excuses, lectures, phone calls, interviews, and so on. The world over, humans are constantly interacting, trying to get things done, through language. If we removed talk from our daily life, we would be removing much of what we actually "do." In this sense, language use is *constitutive* of our social life, that is,

speaking does not just happen *in* social interaction, speaking itself *is* social interaction.

Through our engagement in certain types of speech exchanges, our lives get organized in particular ways and not in others. When someone gives a lecture, others are expected (and in some cases required) to be an audience. This is a social commitment that binds participants and makes them accountable for how they behave. For example, audience members are expected to listen quietly to a lecture and react under appropriate circumstances, e.g. laugh when the speaker makes a joke or raise their hands when the speaker asks for a show of hands. Similarly, when someone greets us, we need to pay attention and respond in appropriate ways (ignoring a greeting is definitely an option, but an option that has social consequences!) (Duranti 1997b). As in the case of lectures or greetings, when we want to ask for a favor or argue a case in front of the law or any kind of state or local institution, the language that we use is not *added* to our request or to our plea. It is an essential part of it. If you remove speaking, the event would not be an event. This is true of a long list of social events in our lives, probably in a great majority of them.

3.4.1 Conversation analysis

In the 1960s no one could have agreed more with the idea that language is a form of social organization than a group of sociologists who became known as "conversation analysts." This explains the inclusion of articles by Harvey Sacks and Emanuel Schegloff in Gumperz and Hymes' (1972) edited volume *Directions in Sociolinguistics: The Ethnography of Communication.* Sacks and Schegloff were arguing within sociology that one should study conversation as a prominent site of social organization. They showed that conversational turn-taking is rule-governed and at the same time sufficiently flexible to leave room for individuals to engage in different kinds of activities, from establishing one's identity to telling a story, from fixing a potential misunderstanding to making requests. In addition, turn-taking leaves room for individual and contextual variation. For example, while the ways in which two people start or end a telephone conversation is highly predictable, each time they do so they must take into consideration contextually relevant information and must not sound too abrupt or unmotivated. In other words, the openings and closings of conversation must be *achieved* by the parties involved in the conversation (Schegloff 1968, 1986; Schegloff & Sacks 1973).

Conversation analysts started from the study of telephone conversations to arrive at generalizations about the underlying principles (or rules) that allow speakers to collaboratively engage in *any* conversation. From the observation of the ways in which speakers coordinate their actions in conversations, Sacks and Schegloff identified a number of principles through which turn-taking is managed. They argued that these

principles govern any kind of social action done through talk, including greetings, opening and closing a conversation, making, accepting, or rejecting requests, offers, compliments, and so on.

Although their methodology went against several of the methodological assumptions made by linguists at that time, William O. Bright, a linguistic anthropologist and then editor of *Language*, the prestigious journal of the Linguistic Society of America, nevertheless accepted for publication the first major article on the organization of turn-taking in English conversations (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson 1974). A few years later, Bright published another article by the same authors on the organization of self- and other-correction in conversation (Schegloff, Jefferson & Sacks 1977). Conversation analysts' finding on the sequential organization of speaking in spontaneous conversation inspired linguists and psychologists who were interested in discourse and language use (or "performance" as Chomsky called it) and who did not want to limit themselves to taking the sentence as the largest unit of analysis.

Since then, the insights of conversation analysts have been adopted by a growing number of grammarians and discourse analysts (e.g. Thompson & Couper-Kuhlen 2005) and have made it into the core of linguistic anthropology, originally through the work of researchers like Charles Goodwin (e.g. 1981, 1994) and Marjorie H. Goodwin (e.g. 1990, 2006) and through the study of children's discourse and language socialization (Ochs & Schieffelin 1979, 1983, 1984).

In his dissertation work, Charles Goodwin showed that the type of speech act that speakers perform is sensitive to the type of recipient they end up securing through eye-gaze (Goodwin 1981). The observable fact that within the same turn an utterance that started as an offer of information may end up being transformed into a request for confirmation shows that speakers are very sensitive to their interactional context and adjust their social moves accordingly. From the point of view of language as a non-neutral medium, the analysis of conversational interaction demonstrates that any kind of previously conceived goal held by speakers must adjust to the contingencies of the here-and-now as mediated by the principles of conversational turn-taking.

3.4.2 Genres
The category "genre" was one of the components of Hymes' (1972b) SPEAKING Model[3] and became a major object of inquiry among ethnographers of speaking who looked at native categorizations of speaking genres (e.g. lecture, lesson, sermon, prayer, speech, story, joke) and at the social functions of different genres within a variety of events. Researchers focused on the structural properties of genres (e.g. Bauman & Sherzer 1974; Sherzer 1983) and on their emerging features (e.g. Hanks

1987; Briggs & Bauman 1992). Like the events in which they are used (Irvine 1979), it was shown that genres themselves differ in the ways in which they allow for variation and multiplicity of voices and positions (Bakhtin 1986; Briggs & Bauman 1992; Bauman 2004). Ethnographers of communication went beyond the older conceptualization of poetic genres in terms of texts and studied them in terms of performance (e.g. Keenan 1973; Bauman 1975; Duranti 1992a). An awareness of the interactional demands and consequences of the performance of a given genre is also important for our understanding of the role of genres as organizing principles of social action.

The study of genres offers the opportunity to study how verbal performance is also linked to other modalities, including music, and how the "poetic" function of language (Jakobson 1960) is pervasive in human communication (Banti and Giannattasio 2004; Alim 2006).

In the documentation and analysis of Samoan village councils or *fono*, I discovered that the organization of speaking, with its aesthetic canons and its long turns (which I called "macro-turns") sequentially organized in terms of status and relative rank, allowed for social control of the expression of anger and other negative emotions and favored a limited exchange of information about the circumstances or causes of a given conflict or problem (Duranti 1994). In the Samoan *fono*, speakers are expected to embed the discussion of the issues of the day within long sequences of esoteric proverbs and metaphors that recognize the special (or "sacred") nature of the occasion and the special status of the participants (all of whom are title-holders in the community). By the time a speaker gets to say what he thinks about the issue at hand, much has been said to establish a mood of reciprocal respect and to stress the importance of social harmony. The language used in the Samoan village councils I documented shows that the verbal organization of the event (e.g. order of speakers, length of turns, internal organization of each macro-turn, indirect discourse, use of metaphors and proverbs) is an instrument of control for what is debatable and who can talk about what and when. This does not mean, however, that traditional oratory always reproduces the status quo and makes logical argumentation impossible (Bloch 1975). Some of the general principles that underlie the different positions taken by participants are sometimes made explicit, like when someone says that what is being debated expresses a conflict between tradition and modern institutions, for example in the choice between secret ballot and decision by consensus in a general election.

In sum, ethnographers of communication have shown that the variety of genres found within and across societies corresponds to the variety of social contexts that those genres help establish and control. As originally predicted by Hymes, ways of speaking organize ways of being in the world.

3.4.3   Registers

Registers are another example of a class of linguistic phenomena that are shaped by and at the same time organize social interaction. A register is a publicly recognized cluster of linguistic features (e.g. pronunciation, specific words, syntactic constructions, morphology, intonation patterns, sometimes also gestures) associated with particular cultural practices and types of people who engage in them (e.g. radio announcers, waiters, medical doctors, school teachers, street vendors, flight attendants). Each individual has a repertoire of registers or a "register range" that provides him or her with a corresponding range of identities and access to specific activities and institutional roles (Agha 2004, 2007).

In some cases a given register implies (and selects) a particular type of listener. Thus, for example, "foreigner talk" is a type of simplified register used in some speech communities to talk to foreigners (Ferguson 1975). Similarly, "baby talk" is the way in which parents speak to infants in some countries (Ferguson 1964), but not in all (Ochs & Schieffelin 1984). "Baby talk" (or "Motherese") is characterized by simplification of phonology, morphology (e.g. syllable structure), and syntax, slowing down of speech, exaggeration of intonation and positive affect. The basic principle of this register is that adults adjust to what they believe to be the cognitive and linguistic capacity of the infant. In the above-mentioned article by Ochs, Solomon and Sterponi (2005), baby talk is re-analyzed as a type of register that is ill-suited for communicating with children affected by severe autism because these children have a harder time decoding words whose sounds are being stretched out and tend to withdraw when presented with an intense stimulus like the exaggerated positive affect displayed by the therapists. This kind of research provides strong evidence for the hypothesis that ways of speaking have an impact on what participants in the interaction can accomplish cognitively and interactionally.

More generally, this line of work shows that in addition to being a medium for representing experience, language plays a crucial role in the constitution of the social context in which it is used.

3.5   Commitment to the study of language as a system of differentiation

Starting in the 1950s, and partly under the influence of the work done by Charles Ferguson and John Gumperz in multilingual communities in India, linguists started to focus on diversity within the same community of speakers and to question the ways in which languages had been studied within structuralist linguistics. Ferguson and Gumperz (1960) introduced the notion of variety as a way to rethink the traditional notions of language and dialect. They proposed a number of hypotheses regarding

how language varieties are used to perform certain social activities including the expression of solidarity and the communication of the perceived status of one's interlocutors.

This new focus on language varieties was groundbreaking. Instead of thinking about linguistic diversity in terms of cognitive categories or worldviews (the way in which Humboldt or Whorf would have done), Ferguson's and Gumperz's discussion of multilingualism in India brought to the forefront the linguistic bases of social prestige and the differential access that speakers have to socially prestigious linguistic varieties.

William Labov's research on New York City as a speech community built on Ferguson and Gumperz's work – as well as on work in dialectology and historical change – and established the foundations of quantitative urban sociolinguistics (Labov 1966). The following decades saw a fluorescence of sociolinguistic research on linguistic differentiation and on its implications for the ways in which members use language, mostly unconsciously, to establish and negotiate their status in society (see the chapters in this book).

Meanwhile, linguistic anthropologists continued to carry out fieldwork in (mostly) small communities focusing on how language is used to establish, maintain, and, more rarely, challenge, social differentiation. At first by using participant observation and interviews with native speakers and later by integrating these traditional anthropological methods with audio (and, eventually, visual) recordings, linguistic anthropologists documented ritual as well as everyday interactions to establish ways in which linguistic choices were used to negotiate social status or rank (e.g. Irvine 1974; Brown & Levinson 1978), social identities (e.g. Zentella 1990; Morgan 1994; Errington 1998; Bucholtz & Hall 2004a), and the construction of gender roles (e.g. Philips, Steele & Tanz 1987; Goodwin 1990; Ochs 1992; Kulick 2003).

3.5.1   Language ideologies

The commitment to language as a system of differentiation was further solidified in the 1980s with a focus on the study of language ideologies (Woolard & Schieffelin 1994; Kroskrity 2000). Building on the work of Michael Silverstein on language ideology and metapragmatics (e.g. Silverstein 1979, 1993), a number of linguistic anthropologists explored the practical implications of speakers' beliefs about how their own language is structured and used. They found linguistic purism across a number of communities and the utilization of linguistic choice as a weapon for discrimination (Schieffelin, Woolard & Kroskrity 1998).

As summarized by Judith Irvine and Susan Gal (2000), the basic assumption made by those working on language ideologies is that there is no "view from nowhere" and, instead, any perspective on language

is positioned, that is, is imbued with sociopolitical as well as personal investments. Irvine and Gal discuss three recurring semiotic processes through which ideology is manifested in language: iconization, fractal recursivity, and erasure. They argue that speakers interpret certain linguistic features as indications of particular qualities of persons or groups (iconization), project the difference at one level (e.g. between two groups) into differences at another level (e.g. between registers within one language) (fractal recursivity), and ignore or reduce complexities through "erasure," as when linguistic homogeneity is assumed or predicated despite widespread linguistic heterogeneity.

Research on language ideology is closely related to but still distinct from Pierre Bourdieu's (1991) concept of *symbolic domination.* In his view, the social value of the language varieties that we speak (e.g. the dialect or dialects we are comfortable with, the register range) is given by the place of such varieties within a linguistic market that the individual cannot control. Therefore, for Bourdieu, as users of particular language varieties we are the victims of a system of social discrimination that has profound consequences for our chances to succeed in society.

3.5.2 Differentiation through narrative activity

An important development of the 1980s in linguistic anthropology was the broadening of the area of inquiry to include, in addition to elicited speech (e.g. through interviews) and the language of ritual encounters, spontaneous everyday conversation (e.g. Tannen 1981; Gumperz 1982a; Brenneis 1984; Haviland 1986). A few pioneering scholars extended the use of video recording from the controlled context of laboratory experimentation into the homes of the people to examine the role of language in the daily construction of identities and social differentiation. A successful example of this type of analysis is the work on spontaneous multiparty narrative activity among family members carried out by a team of researchers directed by Elinor Ochs at the University of Southern California in the 1980s. After coding the narrative segments in terms of the roles that family members assumed within a narrative activity, the researchers showed that fathers tend to be the preferred *recipients* of narratives of personal experience and they are also the most likely *problematizers*, that is, the ones who question the actions reported in a narrative. At the same time, fathers are the least likely and mothers are the most likely to be *problematizees*, that is, in the role of those who have their actions questioned and scrutinized by other family members. Ochs and Taylor (1995) interpret these findings as evidence of the collective' construction, within the family, of the father as the judge or evaluator of family members' actions. Taking inspiration from the work of Michel Foucault on social surveillance, they claim that, through narrative activity, the father is co-constructively positioned "to be the ultimate purveyor and judge of other family members' actions, conditions, thoughts, and feelings" (p. 438).

Another important context for the study of narrative activities has been classroom interaction. For example, Patricia Baquedano-Lopez (2001, 2004) studied how the story of the apparition of Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe is told during religious instruction in a Catholic parish in Los Angeles. She shows that the teachers use questions and a number of other contextualization cues (Gumperz 1982a) to establish parallelisms between the characters in the story and the children in the class. The ways in which the telling of the narrative is organized provide an opportunity for students to learn literacy skills and for teachers to provide the students with alternative social identities.

3.5.3 Honorifics

Given the interest in social stratification within anthropology at large, it is not surprising that linguistic anthropologists have always been attracted to the study of "honorifics," understood as the language used to talk to, about, and around people of high social rank (Agha 1994; Irvine 1998). This theme had been discussed under the rubric of "social deixis" in pragmatics (Levinson 1983) and covered such phenomena as the use of alternative address forms (e.g. *tu* and *vous* in French), verbal morphology in Korean and Japanese, and special lexical items in Javanese and Samoan (Errington 1998; Duranti 1992b).

The major change to this interest in the 1980s was an attention to the use of honorifics in interaction and their role in mitigating social conflict or re-defining social identities. For example, the use of the Samoan respectful words (*'upu fa'aaloalo*) was shown to be both context-sensitive and context-creating (Duranti 1992b). The same individuals in the same setting shifted from using ordinary words to respectful words and then back to ordinary words depending on whether they were speaking before, during, or after the meeting of the village council (*fono*). In some cases, the use of respectful words could be used to evoke particular positional identities and social relations regardless of whether the person being addressed or talked about actually held the official status typically indexed by the term used. This suggests that linguistic features (e.g. lexicon, morphology, syntax) are not just indexes of qualities of individuals but also indexes of qualities of activities. Certain members of a given community are linguistically marked as distinct and worthy of special respect only in certain types of interactions and only when they locate themselves in certain places (see, e.g., Keating 1998). The variability found in the use of honorifics in spontaneous interaction highlights the fact that participants have opportunities for negotiation and manipulation of social differentiation through the linguistic resources they have available to them.

3.6   Conclusions

By thinking about language as a non-neutral medium, we can see both continuity and discontinuity in the history of linguistic anthropology. The continuity is represented by what I referred to as an "ontological commitment" to language as a non-neutral medium, that is, a tool that plays a role in the ways in which speakers think and act as well as in the ways in which an activity is socially organized. The discontinuity is represented by different concepts of language, from a coding system (e.g. for classifying the surrounding world as well as the experience that people have of such a world) to a form of social organization (e.g. a way of doing things that defines the activity as well as the roles and relations of the participants), and, finally, to an instrument of differentiation, capable of reproducing inequality and discrimination. Each concept is the product of different theoretical and methodological perspectives. Of the three, the third, namely, language as an instrument of social differentiation, is the closest to past and current concerns within socio-linguistics. At the same time, all three concepts and their respective ontological commitments are crucial for understanding language as a medium for the constitution of society and culture.

4

The social psychology of language: a short history

W. Peter Robinson and Abigail Locke

4.1   Introduction

Systematic study of the social psychology of language and its utilization is still in its youth and consequently displays some of the turbulence as well as the vigor and enthusiasm of early adolescence. There were no books or journals dedicated to the subject until the second half of the twentieth century. Even now, academics specializing in the field are to be numbered only in the low hundreds, but they can use the work of many others for its advancement. The slow rate of expansion of interest is a disappointment to those pioneers who were astounded originally at the almost universal neglect of language and its use in social psychology courses and textbooks. Still, the field attracts no more than a handful of citations in most standard social psychology texts. Given the pervasiveness of speaking, listening, reading, and writing in the real lives of real people, it remains astonishing that so many students of human behavior and experience can continue to neglect its relevance. In much of the data they collect and work with, they treat it simply as a channel through which the thoughts, feelings, and attitudes of participants are transmitted transparently.

Nevertheless, much more has been achieved in advancing knowledge in the area than can be accommodated in a single chapter, and the coverage here may be justly criticized as inadequate and unfortunate in what it omits. Attention is paid to perceived desirable correctives for the future as well as to the successes of the past. Some of the hazards and difficulties which have beset us preface the body of the review. Learning from the mistakes and weaknesses of the past is a healthy recipe for doing better in the future, especially since some of those mistakes have led to continuing unnecessary and stultifying conflicts, whereas in fact they could have encouraged constructive articulation and integration rather than exclusion and rejection. Many of these conflicts have been