

## Performance and Encoding of Agency in Historical-Natural Languages

Alessandro Duranti  
University of California, Los Angeles

*After providing a working definition of agency, I will suggest that there are two mutually constitutive and yet analytically distinct dimensions of agency that are enacted in and through language: performance and representation. In the performance dimension, I distinguish between "ego-affirming" and "context-constituting" agency. In the representation dimension, I concentrate on grammatical framing and discuss two related principles and their implications: (i) all natural languages allow for the representation of agency; (ii) all natural languages allow for the mitigation of agency.*

### 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In this paper I will provide a working definition of agency, and I argue that there are two mutually constitutive and yet analytically distinct dimensions of agency that are enacted in and through language: *performance* and *encoding*. In the performance dimension, I distinguish between "ego-affirming" and "act-constituting" agency. In the

<sup>1</sup> A longer and more elaborate discussion of agency will be found in my paper "Agency in language," to appear in *A Companion to Linguistic Anthropology*, A. Duranti (ed.), Blackwell. I benefited a great deal from discussion on agency with a number of colleagues including Laura Ahearn, Vincent Barletta, Doug Hollan, Laura Sterponi, and Sandra Thompson. Special thanks go to Adrienne Lo for reading and commenting on earlier drafts of this paper.

encoding dimension, I concentrate on grammatical framing and discuss three related generalizations and their implications: (a) the centrality of agency, (b) the diversity of the encoding of agency, and (c) the omission of agents.

Despite the fact that the issue of the understanding and control that individuals have vis-à-vis their group's (or groups') cultural assumptions has long been the object of study of psychological anthropology, the term "agency" itself has been only recently brought into the social sciences by post-structuralist social theorists like Anthony Giddens (1979) and Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1990), who tried to define a theory of social action that would recognize the role played by social actors in the production and reproduction of social systems, and thus overcome the structuralist and Marxist tendency to see human action as produced by a logic (in structuralism) or historical laws (in Marxism) that human subjects can neither control nor understand. Social theorists, however, have not elaborated on the linguistic implications of their theories beyond a number of provoking but generic claims regarding the social implications of language usage (Bourdieu 1982). Linguists, in turn, have been dealing with agency as a semantic notion since the mid-1960s, but have kept their models largely devoid of social implications. Issues of the social functions of permission and obligation are mentioned in more recent and functionally-oriented studies of modality (Bybee and Fleischman, 1995: 4), but much more needs to be done to integrate those studies with a more general theory of agency. The institutional separation among the fields of linguistics, anthropology, and sociology in the second part of the 20th century has certainly contributed to the intellectual division and the ensuing lack of cross-fertilization. Discourse analysts, linguistic anthropologists, sociolinguists, and other interdisciplinary researchers have tried to bridge the gap with limited success, in part due to the difficulty of communicating across discipline boundaries and in part due to the paucity of clear theoretical statements that could be either adopted or challenged by scholars in other fields. I will here argue, however, that there are a number of claims made on agency based on language use and language structure that can be integrated with a social theory of agency (see also Ahearn, 1999; 2001).

## 2. Toward a Definition of Agency

Drawing from contributions from a number of fields including linguistics, anthropology, sociology, and philosophy, I propose the following working definition of agency:

- (1) Agency is here understood as the property of those entities (i) that have some degree of control over their own behavior, (ii) whose actions in the world affect other entities (and sometimes their own), and (iii) whose actions are the object of evaluation.

The three properties of agency included in (1) are interconnected. For example, the first property of agency (degree of control over one's own behavior) is closely related to, but not identical with, the notion of intentionality, a term that is often evoked in the discussion of agency. However, there is often confusion, or at least lack of clarity, regarding what intentionality means for each author. If by intentionality we mean, with Husserl (1931:223), the property of an entity of being directed-toward or being about something, e.g. the "aboutness" of human conduct, there is no question that such a property is at work in those actions or events that we recognize as involving agency. If, on the other hand, by intentionality we mean the conscious planning of a given act (or sequence of acts) by someone (or something?), we start to run into trouble. One of the problems in this case is that the attribute of conscious planning as a prerequisite for agency would immediately exclude institutions from the discussion of agency given that, as pointed out by Giddens (1979, 1984), institutions have no consciousness and yet, they do have the power, a power of a kind that is different from the sum of the powers of the individuals involved, to "make a difference," that is, to have an effect (on themselves, on other institutions, on individuals, on the environment). Another reason to resist a definition of intentionality that implies conscious planning is that, as pointed out by a number of social theorists (most effectively by Garfinkel, 1967), there is a type of routine monitoring of one's actions in the (familiar) world that is not subject to the same level of analytical rationalization that becomes necessary when we are asked to provide an account of those actions, e.g. after the fact. The notion of control over one's actions is closely connected not only with the already invoked notion of power (implicit in the second criterion), but also with the notion of evaluation (the third criterion), through the notion of freedom, understood as the possibility of having acted otherwise.

This possibility must be maintained as a feature of agency in spite of the fact that there are situations in which human actors might feel (or be judged) unable to act otherwise.

A crucial aspect of (1)(ii) is that agents are entities whose actions have consequences for themselves or others. In other words, they "affect" themselves or some other entities (see Lyons, 1977; Jackendoff, 1990) or, we could say, they are involved in a causative chain (Talmy, 2000; Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). The extent to which such actions are performed willfully and with specific goals in mind varies. Such variation is responsible for the degree of agency that is attributed to a given entity and also for the type of evaluation they may receive.

To fully appreciate the importance of evaluation in the construction of agency, we must connect it not only to morality (see Taylor, 1985), but also to performance, in its various meanings and connotations (Duranti, 1997b:14-17). First, there is an evaluation of someone's words as they contribute to the presentation and realization of a self (the speaker), who is always also a moral subject. Second, there is the evaluation of someone's words as they contribute toward the constitution of culture-specific acts and activities (what I would call the ethno-pragmatic level). Third, there is the evaluation of someone's words as they display his or her knowledge (linguistic competence), the sources of such knowledge (evidentiality, modality), and the use of such knowledge for specific ends, including aesthetic ones (Bauman, 1975, 1993; Hymes, 1975). In all three types of evaluation (regarding the accumulation of knowledge, the sources of knowledge, and the display of knowledge), speakers are engaged with an audience (whether real or imaginary) without which the very notion of evaluation, as well as, of course, the notion of agency, would have no meaning.

## 3. Two Dimensions of Agency

Keeping in mind the working definition provided in (1), I will here propose that there are two basic dimensions of agency in language: *performance* and *encoding*. Although I will discuss these two dimensions separately, the two dimensions are in fact mutually constitutive, that is, it is usually the case that performance (the enacting of agency, its coming into being) relies on and simultaneously affects the encoding (how human action is depicted through linguistic means).

Conversely, encoding always serves performative functions, albeit in different ways and with varying degrees of effectiveness. By describing agentive relationships among different entities (e.g. participants in a speech event, characters in a story) and affective and epistemic stances toward individuals and events, speakers routinely participate in the construction of certain types of beings, including moral types, and certain types of social realities in which those beings can exist and make sense of each other's actions.

### 3.1. *The Performance of Agency*

Agency is performed at a number of levels. The first level is what I call "ego-affirming." A second level is "act-constituting." In the past, it is the latter that has been highlighted, even by authors who were concerned with identity and identity formation. Students of language were so anxious to prove the axiom that "language is action (too)" that they forgot to recognize that language already does something by *being*, before *doing*.

#### 3.1.1. *Ego-Affirming Agency*

A basic and recurrent type of agency expressed and realized by language is what we might call "self-" or "ego-affirming." This type of agency is usually achieved, albeit in different degrees, any time language is used. The very act of speaking in front of others who can perceive such an act establishes the speaker as a being whose existence must be reckoned with in terms of his or her communicative goals and abilities. As the most sophisticated form of human expression, language establishes its users as entities that must also possess other human qualities including the ability to affect their own and others' ways of being. Hence, this most basic level of agency, an agency of an existential sort which, however, needs others (whether as a real or imaginary audience), does not need to rely on referential or denotational meaning. It is language *per se* as a human faculty, rather than the meaning of its words, that is sufficient for agency as ego-affirming. This basic and yet already complex level of agency is achieved, for example, when we hear the sounds produced by an individual (or group) well enough to know that a language is being used but not distinctly enough to identify the words that are being uttered or even the specific language that is spoken. Even though we cannot interpret what is being talked about, we grant the speaker the performance of a special type of self-assertion, one that goes even beyond the slogan

*loquor ergo sum* (Lyons, 1982) to something that is best represented as *loquor, ergo agens sum*.

At first, the identification of this type of agency-through-language might seem redundant or superfluous. One might argue that the use of language is not necessary for human beings to assert their existence as agents. Any sign of life, including such natural and usually unconscious acts as blinking or breathing, should suffice to establish that a body is alive and, if not fully active at the moment, at least endowed with the faculties that will allow it to become an agent (although such an assumption is not necessarily warranted if the person is lying in a bed inside of a hospital). One might thus object that this first type of agency-through-language that I am trying to define here is not different from any other human act, including those that do not rely on language, such as walking, glancing, or even snoring. Mere human existence, or rather, human *presence* is something that must be reckoned with by others and therefore implies the power to affect others. If people are standing or sitting next to us or close enough to be able to monitor our actions or to be awakened by the noises we make, we must in some way take their presence into consideration and therefore, one might argue, they are potential or actual agents. In other words, one might argue that humans don't have to *do* anything special to affirm, assert, or enforce their potential for various forms of agency. We cannot but *be*, and being for humans typically means *doing*. When we enter a social space occupied by others, they do not need to do or say anything for us to act according to expectations that take into consideration their presence (and hence their gazing at us, their monitoring of our actions).

While agreeing with these observations, I would still argue that the type of self-affirming done through language, even when the meaning of what is said is not (fully) understood, is of a different nature from mere physical presence or even physical acts other than gestures (which are of course a type of language [Kendon, 1997]). The difference lies in the most basic qualities of language as both a human faculty and a human potential (performance). Language *qua* communication implies not only the sharing of a (spatially and temporally mediated) perceptual world but also the sharing of a historically mediated conceptual world; not only a world of here-and-now, but also a world of there-and-then (in the past as well as in the future). The first

cry of a newborn baby is both a sign of life (nature) and a precursor to the transformation of those sounds into a human voice (culture), which implies language. The unique ways in which language connects us to others is what we perceive as shared history and solidarity. The use of language not only creates but also presupposes community; and community exists because of the possibility of doing, hence the possibility (in some cases we should say the commitment) of its members to be agents. Culture works to enforce (or make possible) a certain type of contextually defined agency.

### 3.1.1.1. Greetings as Recognition of an Other as a Potential Agent

Although this kind of existential agency-through-language is always at work when language is used, there are particular speech activities that, by being dedicated to the establishment of a person's presence and the recognition of this presence by others, foreground this first kind of ego-directed-agency. This is the case, for example, in greetings. By identifying the interlocutor as a distinct being worth recognizing (Duranti, 1997a:71), greetings also acknowledge the Other as a possible agent, that is, someone whose actions have potential consequences for our own. This is, by the way, a dimension of greetings that is usually missed if we categorize them as phatic communion (Malinowski, 1923) or phatic communication (Jakobson, 1960), that is, as having the mere function of establishing or maintaining contact between interactants. That greetings constitute a type of agency-recognition is made particularly obvious by their absence, which may be interpreted in certain contexts not so much as a denial of the Other's presence but as a denial of the Other's actual or potential power to affect us or be relevant to our ways of being. This hypothesis can be tested by examining who gets greeted when and by whom. In all communities there are individuals or groups, for example, children or servants, who are not greeted even though they inhabit places and are present in situations where greetings *are* exchanged. For example, in Samoan communities, children are usually not greeted when one enters a house. This absence of greetings might even include young unmarried adults, a categorical extension that is recognized in the fact that, for example, an unmarried woman, even in her thirties, is called *teine*, 'girl.' On the other hand, in the U.S., especially among the white middle class, there is a tendency to engage in greetings even with newborn babies and very young infants, who are clearly unable to be cognizant of the activity. In both cases, whether consciously or not, adults

are implying and enforcing specific ideologies of agency (and, in this case, ideologies of childhood). In one case (Samoa), children are being defined as having a weak (or derived) agency, for example they might be seen as instrumental to (or dependent upon) the agency of others. In the other case (white middle class communities in the U.S.), children's agency is raised to a level beyond their actual capability. These specific behaviors correspond rather closely to different conceptions of the relationship between children and adults in the two societies: the adult-centered perspective of most activities in Samoa (excluding imported literacy practices) and the child-centered perspective of many activities in middle class families in the U.S. (Ochs and Schieffelin, 1984). In both cases, it is a stance vis-à-vis agency that plays a major role in the type of participation that is expected and allowed in greetings.

### 3.2. Act-Constituting Agency

The view that language not only describes an already-made world but constitutes real and imaginary worlds through culture-specific and contextually-designed (mostly, but not necessarily, appropriate) *acts* is at the foundation of a number of contemporary philosophical, linguistic, and anthropological theories, with roots in the European intellectual tradition represented by authors as diverse as Ludwig Wittgenstein and Bronislaw Malinowski. It was, however, the British philosopher John L. Austin who, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, articulated in a more systematic fashion a formal apparatus for a theory of acts-through-language (Austin, 1962, 1975), which laid the foundations for what came to be known as Speech Act Theory (Searle, 1969). Starting from a fictitious distinction between *constative* utterances (e.g. the sky is blue) and *performative* utterances (e.g. you're fired!), Austin argued that all utterances are in fact *acts*, and therefore (in plain language), *words always do things*. It is thus necessary to distinguish between the utterance as it can be interpreted according to grammatical rules and truth-values (the *locutionary* act), traditionally the object of study of grammarians and logicians, respectively, and the utterance as an act the speaker *intends* to perform by means of conventional expressions typically used to perform such an act, such as a promise, a threat, a declaration, an apology, a suggestion, a compliment, a complaint, and so on. The latter type of act, which Austin called *illocutionary*, can be made explicit by means of a special class of verbs that he called *performatives* (i.e. expressions that do things,

perform deeds). By conjugating these verbs in the first person singular, we obtain a method for analyzing the type of act intended by the speaker for any given utterance. An assertion would be represented by preceding it with *I inform you that*, a command by *I order you to*, a promise by *I promise you that*, and so forth. Austin was also aware of the fact that utterances may have consequences that are different from the speakers' intentions and coined the term *perlocutionary act* for the effects of a given utterance, irrespective of its intended and conventional force, for example, your telling me that you just sent in an application for a certain job might have the intended effect of informing me of this decision of yours and the unintended effect of making me decide that I should also apply for the same job. It turns out, in ways that were made explicit by Grice's notion of *implicature* (Grice, 1975; Levinson, 1983), a great deal of problem-solving in daily life is centered around the prediction of precisely this type of non-conventional, and yet quite common and hence predictable, effects of our talk. Being (or feeling) adept at such prediction may in fact be what we (as natives) call "being a member (of a given culture)."

Austin, Searle, and Grice made a number of assumptions about truth, intentions, and conventions that have been criticized by a number of authors (e.g. Derrida, 1982; Schegloff, 1992; Streeck, 1980). Within linguistic anthropology, Michelle Rosaldo (1982) criticized the universality of the notion of person presupposed by Speech Act Theory, including its strong commitment to sincerity. Michael Silverstein (1977) suggested that Austin's notion of what language can do relies too heavily on the ability that speakers have to identify certain acts by means of verbs describing those acts, such as the English verbs *inform*, *claim*, *suggest*, *request*, *warn*, *apologize*, *congratulate*, *greet*, *nominate*, *bless*, *promise*, *threaten*. Silverstein rightly pointed out that the illocutionary force of speech is only one type of social action. There are other types of actions performed by linguistic signs that are not conceived as or represented by performative verbs. A large category of such acts includes *indexes* (a term borrowed from the writings of the philosopher Charles Peirce), that is, expressions through which some aspect of the situation-at-hand is *presupposed* or even *created* (Silverstein, 1976b). For example, certain linguistic features (pronunciation, use of linguistic expressions, and so on) presuppose an existential connection between the speaker and a particular place (e.g. people from Northern Italy quickly recognize my Italian as "from

Rome"), although sometimes the inference may be factually wrong, thereby establishing a temporary fictional identity (e.g. people from Southern Italy hear my accent as "not-Southern" and sometimes mistakenly place me a bit too far North, that is, as "from Tuscany"). The use of a particular title (e.g. Doctor, Professor, Senator) can presuppose the status of the addressee in a particular profession or public office. Other times indexical expressions can *de facto* help create an identity or position (see Ochs, 1992; Hall, 1995), like when speakers might decide to exaggerate or fake a regional accent to create co-membership with their listeners, or when addressees are "momentarily given" a title as a way of boosting their status, which might induce them to act according to whatever cultural expectation is associated with that status (e.g. being gracious, generous). In Rome, in the 1960s, unlicensed parking attendants hoping for a tip used to call everyone who went to park in their self-ascribed lot *dotto*' (short for the Standard Italian *dottore*), the title conferred at the completion of a university degree, even when their addressee was visibly too young to have such a title. In the late 1970s, while living in Samoa, I learned to predict when people were going to ask me for a favor from the fact that they would come into our house, sit down, lower their voice, and start addressing me with such forms as *Lau Afioga* 'Your Highness' (said to a chief), instead of using the Samoan version of my first name (Alesana). In all of these cases, speakers are *doing things with language* (e.g. evoking social identities, invoking solidarity, elevating someone's status in the attempt to create a sense of obligation), even though there might be no specific performative verbs that identify such acts. In fact, when we look at spontaneous interaction, we find that there is a great deal that is being accomplished (or at least attempted) with language beyond the illocutionary force identified by means of explicit or implicit performative verbs.

There are other important dimensions of the performance of agency that are often left out of the linguistic and philosophical literature (Duranti, 1997b:14-17). One of them is the creative power of language as realized in poetry, songs, theater, everyday humor, and storytelling. This is a dimension where speakers/singers/actors/storytellers exploit some taken for granted or hidden properties of language, transforming our ordinary understanding of language and its relation to reality. It is also a dimension where the aesthetic function of language dominates (Jakobson, 1960), making language users

accountable for the form of their expressions and the style of delivery. In this realm, a wide range of usually ignored properties or configurations of language become very relevant, among them, the human voice, which both affirms the speaker *qua* speaker (see 2.1) and reveals human qualities and emotions that are just as powerful as the propositional content and performative verbs (e.g. *promise*, *warn*, *declare*, *request*) discussed by speech act theorists.

More generally, the doing of things through language always entails the accountability of the language user(s). It is precisely when our labor is recognized that we also become accountable for the implications and consequences of such labor. Linguistic labor is no exception, hence the importance of disclaimers for those speakers who are in a positional role that requires them to say something for which they do not want to claim responsibility (Bauman, 1993; Du Bois, 1986).

#### 4. Encoding of Agency

Based on the existing literature on agency, we can draw the following generalizations, to be understood as putative universals of language structure and language use:

- (2) a. *Centrality of agency in languages*: All languages have ways of representing agency.
- b. *Diversity of encoding of agency*: There is variation both across languages and within the same language in the ways in which agency is represented.
- c. *Omission of agent*: A great number of spoken and written utterances do not contain information on the identity of the agent responsible for the acts/events/states of affairs that are being described.

##### 4.1. Agency and Transitivity

There is substantial evidence that agency plays an important role in the grammatical organization of the world's languages (see Foley and Van Valin, 1984; Grimshaw, 1990; Sánchez, 1997), and languages are often classified in terms of how they encode agency. For example, grammarians distinguish among the following three types of languages:

- (3) a. nominative-accusative (e.g. English, Hawaiian, Italian)
- b. ergative-absolutive (e.g. Basque, Dyirbal, Samoan)
- c. stative-active (also called 'split-subject') (e.g. Acehnese, Guarani, Lakhota).

Agency plays a crucial role in this classification because the difference among the three types is based on the ways in which a language encodes the Agent NP vis-à-vis other types of NP arguments of the verb.

In nominative-accusative languages, what we call the 'subject' (in the nominative case in languages like Latin) may represent a range of participants in the event (Keenan, 1984). For example, in English the subject of transitive sentences like (4) is treated in the same way (it occupies the same position, it governs rules such as subject-verb agreement) as the subject of sentences like (5)-(8), regardless of the differences among the types of participants it represents. Grammarians have used a number of names for such participant roles, including: Case (with a capital "C" to distinguish it from the morphological "case" of languages like Latin) (Fillmore, 1968), thematic role (Jackendoff, 1972), and theta-role (Chomsky, 1982). The most commonly used names for such roles are: Agent, Actor, Object (or Patient, Theme, or Undergoer), Instrument, Experiencer, Goal, and Source.

- |                                 |                         |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------|
| (4) The boy broke the window.   | (The boy = Agent)       |
| (5) The window broke.           | (The window = Object)   |
| (6) The rock broke the window.  | (The rock = Instrument) |
| (7) The boy walks to the house. | (The boy = Actor)       |
| (8) The boy is happy.           | (The boy = Experiencer) |

In English, when present, the NP in the Agent role is always chosen to be the Subject, unless the verb is in the passive voice (e.g. *the window was broken by the boy*), whereas the Instrument NP can be the subject of an active sentence only if the Agent is not present, as shown in example (6) above (Fillmore, 1968:33; Jackendoff, 1990).

In ergative-absolutive and stative-active languages, agency (or degrees of agency) is encoded in the grammar. In an ergative-absolutive language, the Agent NP (corresponding to the subject of a transitive clause in English) is marked differently from the Object/

Patient/Undergoer NP, even when there is no Agent NP in the sentence (i.e. even when it would occupy the subject position in English).

The ergative-absolutive pattern is the closest realization of the definition of agency presented in (1) above, not only because the Agent is singled out, but also because its status is partly defined by the presence of an Object, that is, an entity that is affected by the actions of the Agent (conversely, we could say that part of the definition of an Agent is that it affects an Object). This is clearly demonstrated in Samoan by the fact that the ergative marker only appears if the event that is being represented includes an Object. For example, in (9), from a conversation among young men about a Dracula movie, the highly agentive participant Dracula, here called *le kama*, literally 'the boy,' is given the ergative marker to describe his despicable action on young women.

(9) ("Dracula"—audio-recorded in 1978) (Emp=emphatic marker; Erg=ergative marker; TA=tense-aspect marker)

1. T: *leaga le amio o le kama sole gai keige sole.*  
the behavior of the guy (was) bad, those poor girls, man.
2. (0.6)
3. S: *'ai e le kama 'ā?*  
bite Erg the boy Tag  
*the guy (lit. 'the boy') bites (them), doesn't he?*

The presence of the Agent NP (*e le kama*) in line 3 entails an identifiable and malleable Object, which is not realized phonologically but is understood from the context ("those poor girls," mentioned by speaker T in the prior turn). Contrast the use of the verb *'ai* 'bite, eat' in (9) with its use in example (10), where there is no specific Object entailed, and, by definition, the prototypicality of the agency of the human actor diminishes (Dowty, 1991):

(10) ("Dinner 3," video-recorded in 1988; Mother (Mo) complains about daughter's lack of proper etiquette at dinner time)

1. Mo: *e fai ā,*  
TA do Emp  
(grace) is being done

- 2: *'ae lâ e 'ai ā Iva.*  
But there TA eat Emp Iva  
and Iva is already eating.

In active-stative languages, intransitive verbs are divided in two categories: those that mark their subject like the subject of transitive clauses (the Agent), and those that mark their subjects like the direct object of a transitive clause (Object/Patient) (Kibrik, 1985; Mithun, 1991). For example, in Guaraní and Lakhota the first singular personal pronoun has two forms. One is used for subjects of intransitive verbs of actions (I go; I get up) and transitive verbs (I bring it; I catch it). The other form is used for subjects of stative verbs (I am sick; I am sleepy), and for the direct object (Object/Patient) of transitive verbs (it will carry me off; he'll kill me) (see Mithun, 1991).

At first, active-stative languages seem more similar to nominative-accusative languages like English than to ergative languages like Samoan, because they do not distinguish (in some recurrent grammatical patterns) between an entity (called Agent by grammarians) that acts on another entity (Object/Undergoer), such as *the girl* in (11) and an entity (called Actor) that has control over its actions and acts of its own will but without necessarily affecting an Object (or Undergoer), such as *the girl* in (12).

(11) The girl brought the book.

(12) The girl left.

But if we think about the action of the girl in (11) as something that affects her, it would conform to the definition of agency in (1). This is in fact Jackendoff's (1990) and Talmy's (2000) view of certain types of apparently intransitive constructions such as (13) when the referent of the subject is understood as having done the action intentionally:

(13) The girl rolled down the hill.

It is not surprising that some active languages do in fact distinguish between the intentional and unintentional reading of (13) (Mithun, 1991:541).

Finally, it is important to remember that both ergative-absolutive and active-stative languages tend to have "split systems," whereby a distinction that is made in one part of the grammatical system (full nouns) is not made in another (pronouns) (Dixon, 1990; Mithun, 1991). This means then that within the same language agency plays different roles, depending on the type of referent and grammatical form. A considerable body of literature in fact exists on ergative languages (Comrie, 1978, 1981; Dixon, 1979, 1994; Silverstein, 1976a) and other types of languages (Hawkinson and Hyman, 1974) on various "hierarchies" that try to capture precisely this type of phenomena, showing a recurrent continuum from first and second person pronouns to inanimate referents expressed through indefinite NPs. The overall picture we get from these studies is that there are a number of (sometimes conflicting) factors conspiring toward making no system perfectly coherent from the point of view of the encoding of agency. The issue is where to look for a general theory that might account for these inconsistencies.

One of the problems with much of the existing literature on the encoding of agency and other semantic and pragmatic notions is that it takes place in an empirical vacuum, given that it is almost exclusively based on made-up examples and intuitions rather than on actual language usage. When we start to look at what people say, we get a better sense of some of the dimensions that a theory of agency in language would have to take into consideration. For example, it is true that when expressed, Agents tend to appear as subjects in English; however, it is also true that they often do not appear at all. That is, contrary to what often is argued or implied in the literature on agency and thematic roles, it is not true that "[i]n most English sentences the subject is the agent" (Bates and MacWhinney, 1982). On the contrary, most clauses in spoken English are intransitive and therefore have no Agent role expressed (Du Bois, 1987; Thompson and Hopper, in press). Furthermore, the fact that English allows for a wide range of referents in addition to Agents to be represented in the subject position of transitive clauses is exploited in a variety of situations. For example, newspaper articles in the U.S. are full of sentences in which a non-human participant is placed in the subject position of a transitive clause with a predicate that entails properties (of action, attitudes, feelings) we normally associate with people. Here are some examples from the *Los Angeles Times* (May 5, 2001):

- (14) A huge falling tree injured 20 people at Disneyland's Frontierland on Friday  
[...]
- (15) Rents jumped to record highs in Southland [...]
- (16) Arbitration claims against brokerage firms jumped sharply in April [...]
- (17) Tight security will keep the insects in.
- (18) Those funds helped support party activities [...]
- (19) The decision dealt another blow to claims by former senior TRW engineer Nina Schwartz [...]

There are at least two observations that we can make on the basis of these examples. The first is that they allow English speakers/writers to treat certain events that in some cases *may* have (example [14]) and in other cases *must* have (examples [15-19]) involved human agency without having to mention the people responsible for it. In other words, these are representations that could be considered as examples of the phenomenon of "mitigation" of agency (see below). The second observation is of a (weak) Whorfian kind, in the sense that it focuses on the analogy that is being drawn in such constructions between people impacting the world and abstract or concrete things impacting the world (Whorf, 1956). We should take into consideration the possibility that, by representing actions and events typically generated by human beings *as if* they were generated by inanimate objects or abstract sources, English speakers might be giving these non-human entities a quasi-agentive status (Schlesinger, 1989 argues for an agentive interpretation of structures similar to the ones mentioned in [15-20]). In Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) terms, we could say that in these examples, speakers are extending the prototype of agency (in their terms "causation") to less prototypical entities; that is, they are using human agency to think about the role of non-human entities in affecting the world. This second observation (which needs to be corroborated by more robust analysis) opens up the possibility of rethinking one of the prevailing cognitive theories of our time, succinctly named "the intentional stance" by Richard Dennett, as a corollary of English grammatical usage:

[T]he intentional stance consists of treating the object whose behavior you want to predict as a rational agent with beliefs and desires and other mental stages exhibiting what Brentano and others call *intentionality*. (Dennett, 1987:15)

In other words, it might turn out not to be accidental that the theory according to which we, as rational beings, can predict the behavior of a tool or a gadget (e.g. the thermostat) because we treat it as having beliefs and even intentions has been proposed by philosophers whose native language, English, allows for constructions like those in (14)-(19). This possible connection finds some indirect support from the observation that so many languages do not allow for syntactic constructions of the type exemplified in (14)-(19). A possible project is to find out whether such differences correspond to less intentionalist ethno-theories of interpretation (Du Bois, 1993; Duranti, 1993, 2001).

### 5. Mitigation of Agency

Any attempt to fully understand how agency is represented in any given language cannot stop at the examples and types of sentences in which Agents are expressed. We also need to get a sense of those cases in which Agents *could have been* expressed as such but were not. This is a difficult task because it is always dangerous to make hypotheses on the basis of what is *not* there. However, the need for such an approach is implicit in a number of proposals made by formal linguists. For example, Fillmore (1977) and Talmy (2000), among others, noted that the same event can be represented by different grammatical frames and with the subject in a number of different thematic roles. Other linguists have worked with the notion of empathy (Kuno and Kaburaki, 1977; Kuroda, 1974) and viewpoint (DeLancey, 1982). All of these contributions are concerned with the expressive power of language, including the ability that speakers have to present the same event or series of events in a different perspective, from a different stance, and with different emphasis on different participants. From the point of view of agency, this means that in addition to a range of options for its representation, languages also offer a range of options for its absence, that is, for the obfuscation or mitigation of agency. Whether or not speakers are conscious of how they are framing a given event, we know that languages have constructions that allow the choice between mentioning or not mentioning who is responsible for a given event or causal chain of events. There is a considerable body of literature on this subject, especially within the fields of pragmatics and functional linguistics. As pointed out by Susan Berk-Seligson (1990:99-100), there seems to be some cross-linguistic evidence for the use of impersonal constructions as a means of mitigation. In particular, again and again, linguists have claimed that various kinds of

passive or passive-like constructions are used by speakers to avoid assigning blame to specific parties (Kirsner, 1976). We know, for example, that passive-like constructions in many languages are Agent-less (Schesinger, 1989; Shibatani, 1985) and that the majority of examples of passives in English discourse are also Agent-less (Stubbs, 1994). These observations should not be understood as implying that passives are the best solution to the problem of avoiding mention of an Agent (and thus avoiding the issue of assigning responsibility to a party) or that the avoidance of the Agent NP is the only function of the passive (Stubbs, 1994:204). There is a range of other grammatical resources that augment or reduce a speaker's or a referent's agency including deontic modality, that is, the encoding of the possibility or necessity of acts performed by morally responsible Agents (Bybee and Fleischman, 1995; Lyons, 1977:823) and alternative expressions of the role of Agent.

The notion of mitigation also helps us look at discourse to search for would-be Agents, that is, referential NPs that could have been expressed as Agent NPs but were not. This is a strategy followed in Duranti and Ochs (1990) and Duranti (1994:129-38) for Samoan, but it could easily be extended to other languages.

A possible direction for future research is to expand our horizon of theoretical and empirical work to include an understanding of a wider range of phenomena, not only from the point of view of the type of information that is being encoded (e.g. Is the Agent of this event expressed, and if so, how?), but also from the point of view of the type of persons and the type of world that speakers build through their typically unconscious, but nevertheless careful, choice of words. It is in this sense that the notion of representation of agency is intimately tied to the notion of performance. In using language, we are constantly monitoring the type of person we want to be (self) for Others and the type of Others we want to be there for us. The way we handle the expression of agency has a major role in this routine and yet complex enterprise. In constructing our daily discourse, we are constantly monitoring several types of 'flows,' including the flow of information (Chafe, 1987) and the flow of moral stances and moral characters we implicitly establish by using any kind of language (Duranti, 1994).

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Department of Anthropology  
 University of California, Los Angeles  
 P.O. Box 951553  
 Los Angeles, CA 90095-1553  
 aduranti@anthro.ucla.edu