3 Language in context and language as context: the Samoan respect vocabulary

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Editors' introduction

Alessandro Duranti is Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of California, Los Angeles. Originally trained in typological linguistics and discourse analysis, Duranti became interested in integrating grammatical analysis with ethnography during his first fieldwork experience in Western Samoa, in 1978–9. Since then, he has been involved in several projects centered around the documentation of communicative competence in a traditional Samoan village. In his research, Duranti has often focused on political discourse, which he sees as embedded in and at the same time constitutive of specific social activities. In this chapter, he examines one of the lexical features of oratory, respect vocabulary, across a number of settings. Like Philips (this volume), Duranti is concerned with recurrent patterns as used by the same speakers across contexts. Like Cicourel (this volume), he relied on ethnography for making hypotheses about what is relevant for the participants themselves.

Linguistic taxonomies have been used by ethnographers all over the world as a window on the universe of social and psychological relations that make human action meaningful and hence unique. Through the study of the words dedicated to a particular domain, e.g. colors, or to particular kinds of human relationships, e.g. kinship, researchers have the opportunity to test hypotheses about both the universality and the specificity of perceptually and socially salient distinctions. Among the various linguistic taxonomies found in the world languages, honorific lexical systems, e.g. the Javanese speech levels (Geertz 1960) and the "in-laws" languages of Australia (cf. Dixon 1972; Haviland 1979a, 1979b), have captured not only anthropologists' but also linguists' interest. One of the linguists' concerns has been how to formally characterize the linguistic and contextual features that "trigger" the use of a particular lexical or morphological choice. Several types of analytical distinctions have been proposed to describe the different kinds of relationships indexed by lexical choices in honorific registers. In each case, one or more components of the speech event are said to be relevant to the choice of honorific terms. Distinctions among systems and choices have been made in terms of referent honorifics, speaker's honorifics, addressee's honorifics, and bystander's honorifics (cf. Comrie 1976, Levinson 1983).

1979b. Guugu Yimidhirr Brother-in-Law Language. *Language in Society* 8: 365–93.

Levinson, Stephen C. 1983. *Pragmatics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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1   Introduction

As shown by the chapters in this collection, scholars from different disciplines concerned with human interaction and human communication are faced with the problem of defining a theory and methodology able to capture the inherently dynamic character of human action and human understanding. While linguists have been productively experimenting with analytical tools for the description of structural properties of linguistic codes, anthropologists, sociologists, and other social scientists have been stressing the need to understand human interaction as a set of practices that cannot be completely defined prior to the emergent semiotic activities in which they are embodied. Those working on language have been moving to larger and larger units of analysis – namely from the word to the sentence, from the sentence to discourse – and across qualitatively different domains – namely from linguistic texts to social events. As suggested by hermeneutics some time ago (see Gadamer 1976), the challenge is to reproduce in our accounts the sometimes harmonious sometimes conflicting links between the parts and the whole, which, for linguistic anthropologists, consist respectively of linguistic structures and the psycho-social systems giving them content.

In this chapter, I engage in this enterprise and select a linguistic subsystem – a special set of words, or lexical register – as a window on a universe of forms that are both defined by and are used to shape social activities and human understanding of such activities. By combining ethnographic and structural methods of description, I propose a characterization of the Samoan Respect Vocabulary which assumes and goes beyond an instrumental model of the relationship between language and context (see Bühler 1934, Malinowski 1923, Vygotsky 1978). I will demonstrate that a feature analysis of a particular classificatory system can be a useful tool in a first description of the phenomenon, but is too crude for an understanding of the sociocultural implications and assumptions related to the use of such a subsystem in daily interaction. Feature analysis of the kind used to describe selectional restrictions on lexical items – e.g. the generalization that the English verb *eat* needs an animate being as the referent of its subject – assumes a causal relation between context and language, with the former "explaining" the latter. When we look at the