CHAPTER 20 Agency in Language

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1 Introduction

The goal of this chapter is to sketch a model of how agency is enacted and represented in (and through) language. I have chosen to talk about agency *in* language as opposed to the agency *of* language because the latter description might assume the uncritical reification of language as an agent with its own (independent) goals and even with its own will. While it is important to recognize the role that any language has in providing the communicative resources for the definition and enactment of (past, present, and future) realities, it is equally important to develop an analytical framework for distinguishing between speakers' conceptualization of what a language "does" and the conditions that make such a conceptualization possible (see also Kroskrity, this volume; Philips, this volume). As part of the discussion of "linguistic relativity," the issue of the agency *of* language has a long tradition within linguistic anthropology (Duranti 2001; Gumperz and Levinson 1996; Hill and Mannheim 1992). There is also a considerable body of literature on the impact that forces external to a language have on its structure (e.g. phonology) and its meaning – a great deal of sociolinguistics is devoted to these issues. In this chapter, however, I go in a different direction. I start from a working definition of agency and, on its basis, I reconsider two related and yet analytically distinct dimensions of agency: its linguistic realization (performance) and its linguistic representation (grammatical encoding).

As I will discuss below, any act of speaking involves some kind of agency, often regardless of the speaker's intentions and the hearer's interest or collaboration. This is due to the fact that by speaking we establish a reality that has at least the potential for affecting whoever happens to be listening to us, regardless of the originally intended audience. We not only affect the mind and future actions of our listeners by providing new information about the world (e.g. *the house is on fire! This cheese is scrumptious*), we also affect them when we repeat what our listener already knows (e.g. *we live in a democracy*; *Rome wasn't built in a day*; *I used to know you when you were this tall*).

Furthermore, language use is a primary example of what Giddens called the "duality of structure":[1]

> when I utter a grammatical English sentence in a casual conversation, I contribute to the reproduction of the English language as a whole. This is an unintended consequence of my speaking the sentence, but one that is bound indirectly to the recursiveness of the duality of structure. (Giddens 1979: 77–8)

Through linguistic communication, we display our attitudes, feelings, beliefs, and wishes. Once expressed, this type of information has an impact on others, as well as on us (e.g. we proudly reaffirm our convictions or, conversely, we prove to ourselves that we can embrace new ideas and attitudes).

Another challenge in the discussion of agency is due to the problems associated with combining the intuitions expressed in linguistic studies with those expressed by social theorists dealing with human action abstracted from verbal interaction. 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 such as Anthony Giddens (1979, 1984) and Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1990, 2000), who tried to define a theory of social action that would recognize the role played by social actors, viz. agents, 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. This is not surprising, given that the interest in semantic (or thematic) roles like Agent[2] (see below) came out of the generative paradigm established by Chomsky in the late 1950s and early 1960s and has remained influenced by his vision of linguistic theory as separate and separable from social theory (see for example his dismissal of sociolinguistics in Chomsky 1977). Issues of the social functions of permission and obligation are mentioned in more recent and functionally oriented studies of modality (Bybee and Fleischman 1995b: 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 twentieth century has certainly contributed to their intellectual separation and the ensuing lack of public debates around common issues. Discourse analysts, linguistic anthropologists, sociolinguists, and other interdisciplinary researchers have tried to bridge the gap with limited success, due in part to the difficulty of communicating across discipline boundaries and in part 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 for earlier attempts to systematize the available literature).

2 Toward a Definition of Agency

Any attempt to arrive at a definition of agency is a difficult task because it forces us to take a stand with respect to a number of thorny issues including the role of intentionality and the ontological status of the semantic (or thematic) role of Agent and other, related notions (e.g. Patient, Instrument). For example, should they be treated as basic or primitive notions (e.g. Fillmore 1968) or as derived concepts to be defined in terms of entailments associated with certain types of events (e.g. Chierchia 1989; Dowty 1989)?

Another obstacle faced by any attempt at a general definition of agency is the difficulty of combining the intuitions expressed in strictly semantic theories (dealing with linguistic structures, abstracted from social processes) with those expressed in social theories (dealing with social processes, abstracted from verbal interaction) or with those expressed in philosophical theories (based on ideal situations and often purposely devoid of any anthropological understanding). Despite these unresolved issues, however, I will attempt a working definition of agency that tries to take into consideration the intuitions as well as the explicit definitions provided by authors in different fields.

2.1 A working definition of agency

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 (e.g. in terms of their responsibility for a given outcome).

The three properties of agency included in (1) are obviously 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 mental life – 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 after-the-fact account of those actions. 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 (e.g. Lyons 1977; Jackendoff 1990) or, we could say, they are involved in a causative chain (Talmy 1976, 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 (e.g. as Taylor 1985 does) 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 (Kant 1785: 445). 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 their knowledge (linguistic competence), the sources of such knowledge (evidentiality, modality), and its use for specific ends, including aesthetic ones (Bauman 1975, 1993; Chafe and Nichols 1986; Hymes 1975). In all three types of evaluation – regarding the accumulation of knowledge, the sources of knowledge, and the artful display of knowledge – speakers are engaged with an audience (whether real or imaginary) without which the very notion of evaluation would lose its 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 (for lack of a better term) "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 use implies that its users are 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 to be at work. 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, even 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 in a hospital). One might thus object that this first type of agency-through-language is no 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).

3.1.1.1 Greetings as a 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 its recognition by others, foreground this first kind of ego-affirming 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), that is, as having the main 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, such as children or servants, who are not greeted even though they inhabit places and are present in situations where greetings *are* routinely 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 – as shown by the semantic extension of the term *teine* 'girl' to unmarried women, even those in their late thirties. On the other hand, in the USA, especially among the white middle class, there is a tendency to engage in greetings even with newborn babies and very young infants who are unable to be either cognizant of or full participants in the greeting exchange. In both cases, whether consciously or not, adults are implying and enforcing specific ideologies of agency (and, in this case, ideologies of childhood) (see Kulick and Schieffelin, this volume). In one case (Samoa), children are being defined as having a weak (or derived) agency: they might be seen as instrumental to (or dependent upon) the agency of others. In the other case (white middle-class communities in the USA), children's agency is raised to a level beyond their actual capability to control their own actions. 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 USA (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.

3.1.2 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 (1958) and Bronislaw Malinowski (1923, 1935). 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 1965, 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, for example a promise, a threat, a declaration, an apology, a suggestion, a compliment, a complaint, etc. The latter type of act, which Austin called *illocutionary*, can be made explicit by means of a special class of verbs which 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.

Austin's analysis of what words can do was complemented by Grice's (1975) theory of the meaning of the unsaid (Levinson 1983). Grice proposed four universal maxims that are meant to guide our interpretation of what is being said: (1) Quality (say the truth and don't provide information for which you lack evidence), (2) Quantity (give the right amount of information), (3) Relation (be relevant), (4) Manner (avoid obscurities). In other words, according to Grice, we usually assume that people tend to tell the truth (quality), give the contextually appropriate amount of information (quantity), say things that are relevant to the ongoing activity, and say

things in ways that can be understood without too much work. Thus, if I ask someone "Has the meeting started?" and he answers "I don't think everyone has arrived yet," I can infer that he thinks that the meeting hasn't started but has no strong evidence for it. This inference is based on a set of *implicatures* that I can draw on the basis of what the person said as well as on the basis of what he *did not* say. For example, I assume that he is telling me information for which he has evidence (he must be able to monitor who comes into the meeting) and he is not hiding information from me (e.g. the fact that the meeting usually starts even though not everyone is present). I can also assume that the statement that not everyone has arrived yet is relevant to my question (e.g. it is not about people who are not meant to participate at the meeting). And so on. According to Grice, certain social phenomena (e.g. politeness) would be precisely conveyed by the violation of one or more of these maxims. To be polite, we might not tell the truth (quality), might take a long time to say something (quantity), bring up apparently irrelevant information (relevance), and introduce some ambiguous or obscure expressions (manner) (Brown and Levinson 1987).

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; Duranti 1997b: 227–44; 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 (e.g. 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 (such as pronunciation, use of linguistic expressions) presuppose an existential connection between the speaker and a particular place (for example, 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 (as when people from Southern Italy hear my accent as "not-Southern" and sometimes mistakenly place me a bit too far north, such 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 (e.g. Ochs 1992), as when speakers exaggerate or fake a regional accent, sometimes unconsciously and other times consciously (e.g. to create co-membership with their listeners), or when addressees are contingently assigned a title or status so as to induce them to act according to whatever cultural expectation is associated with such a title or status, for example being gracious, generous, or forgiving (see Irvine 1974; Duranti 1992). In Rome, in the 1960s, unlicensed parking attendants hoping for a tip used to address all the men who went to park in the attendants' self-ascribed lot with the term *dotto'* (short for

the Standard Italian *dottore*), a title implying the possession 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' (usually said to an *ali`i* or '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 story-telling (see Banti and Giannattasio, this volume). This is a dimension where speakers/singers/actors/story-tellers exploit some taken for granted or hidden properties of language, transforming our ordinary understanding of language and its relation to reality.[3] 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.[4] In this realm, a wide range of usually ignored properties or configurations of language become very relevant, among them the human voice (De Dominicis 2002), which both affirms the speaker qua speaker (see Section 2.1) and reveals human qualities and emotions that can be equally or more powerful than the propositional content or the explicit performative verbs (e.g. *promise, warn, declare, request*, etc.) 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 the 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; Hill and Irvine 1993).

The act-constituting agency of language is the most studied type of agency within linguistic anthropology and therefore all of the chapters in this volume have something relevant on the topic.

4 Encoding of Agency

I start from the assumption that the grammatical systems of known languages provide us with a record of the range of solutions that past speakers found to particular communicative problems. One such problem is the encoding of agency. Based on the existing literature on how agency is represented through grammatical and discourse devices, we can draw the following generalizations (to be understood as putative universals of language structure and language use):

(2a) *Centrality of agency in languages*: All languages have ways of representing agency.
(2b) *Diversity of encoding of agency*: There is variation both across languages and within the same language in the way in which agency is represented.
(2c) *Mitigation of agency*: All languages have ways of mitigating, that is, modulating some of the properties of agency as defined in (1) by means of a number of grammatical and discourse strategies, including omission (i.e. no mention of agent at all) and alternative grammatical framings (e.g. variation in the expressed connection between an event and the entity that might have caused it).

4.1 Agency and transitivity

There is substantial evidence that agency plays an important role in the grammatical organization of the world's languages and languages are often classified in terms of how they encode agency (e.g. Foley and Van Valin 1984; Grimshaw 1990; Hopper and Thompson 1980; Sánchez 1997). For example, grammarians distinguish among the following three types of languages:

(3a) nominative-accusative (e.g. English, Hawai'ian, Quechua);
(3b) ergative-absolutive (e.g. Basque, Dyirbal, Samoan); and
(3c) stative-active (also called "split-subject") (e.g. Acehnese, Guaraní, 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 (noun phrase) (that is, *the boy* in *the boy broke the window*) *vis-à-vis* other types of NP arguments of the verb.

In nominative-accusative languages what we call "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 (e.g. 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, or 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 with the Agent role is typically 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 a certain degree of agency) is encoded directly and often overtly 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 (corresponding to either subject or object in English). This pattern is here reproduced in (9)–(13), from Samoan, where only the Agent NP is marked by the preposition *e* (the ergative marker), whereas the Object is marked by zero or no preposition (which is the marking of the absolutive in Samoan) regardless of whether there is an Agent present:[5]

(9) *na ta`e e le tama le fa`amalama.* (le tama = Agent)
PST break ERG ART boy the window
'the boy broke the window.'

(10) *na ta`e le fa`amalama.* (le fa`amalama = Object)
PST break ART window
'the window was broken.'

(11) *na ta`e le fa`amalama`i le ma`a.* (le ma`a = Instrument)
PST break ART window INST ART rock
'the window broke with/because of the rock.'

(12) *na alu le tama.* (le tama = Actor)
PST go ART boy
'the boy left/went.'

(13) *e fiafia le tama.* (le tama = Experiencer)
PRES happy ART boy
'the boy is happy.'

This pattern can be seen at work in example (14), from a conversation, where a speaker uses both the ergative *e* with an NP representing a human referent and the instrumental *`i* for a (non-human) Instrument (*se ma`a* 'a rock'):[6]

(14) ("Inspection"; audio-recorded, December 1978)
S: [. . .]*`age`ua kogi e se isi - `i se ma`a.*
if PERF hit ERG ART other INST ART rock
'if (it) is hit by another- by a rock' (self-repair) or 'if (it) is hit by someone with a rock'

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 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 demonstrated in Samoan by the fact that the ergative marker only appears if the event that is being represented includes an Object (although the Object NP may not be expressed). For example, in (15), 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:

(15) ("Dracula"; audio-recorded in 1978)
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 second pause)*

3 S: *`ai* ***e le kama*** *`ã?*
bite ERG ART boy TAG
'the guy (lit. 'the boy') bites (them), doesn't he?'

The presence of the Agent (*e le kama* 'Ergative the boy') in line 3 entails an identifiable and malleable Object, which is not realized phonologically but is semantically implied (through zero anaphora) and identifiable from the discourse context – i.e. "those poor girls" mentioned by speaker T in the prior turn. Contrast the use of the verb *`ai* 'bite, eat' in (15) with its use in example (16), where there is no specific Object entailed – and, by definition, the prototypicality[7] of the agency of the human actor diminishes:

(16) ("Dinner 3," video-recorded in 1988; Mother (Mo) complains about lack of proper etiquette at dinner time)
1 Mo: *e fai ã,*
TA do EMP
'(grace) is being done'
2 *`ae lã e `ai ã Oiko.*
but there TA eat EMP Oiko
'and Oiko is (already) eating.'

In stative-active 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; Merlan 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 (e.g. **I** go, **I** get up) and transitive verbs (e.g. **I** bring it, **I** catch it) and the other form is used for subjects of stative verbs (e.g. **I** am sick, **I** am sleepy) and for the direct object (Object/Patient) of transitive verbs (e.g. it will carry **me** off, he'll kill **me**) (see Mithun 1991).

Data from stative-active languages have been used for a number of arguments in linguistics, including the proposal by Mark Durie (1988), based on Acehnese, to avoid altogether the category "intransitive subject" and use only two roles: Actor and Undergoer (from Foley and Van Valin 1984). Working on Lhasa Tibetan, a language with an active type of structure (it is described as a language where the ergative marker is extended to volitionally acting intransitive subjects), Scott DeLancey (1982, 1990) argued for the interconnection among case marking, aspect, and evidential particles, reinforcing the idea that the encoding of agency is not something that affects only nominal arguments (NPs) but is the combination of a number of linguistic features that, together, provide a perspective on an event, based on the relation between the represented event and the speech event, the source of knowledge the speaker has, and expectations about the way the world is or should be.

At first, stative-active 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 (17), 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), as *the girl* in (18):

(17) The girl brought the book.
(18) The girl left.

But if we think about the action of the girl in (18) 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 (19) when the referent of the subject is understood as having done the action intentionally:

(19) The girl rolled down the hill.

It is relevant that some stative-active languages do in fact distinguish between the intentional and unintentional reading of (19) (e.g. Mithun 1991: 541).[8] The terminological decision over Agent versus Actor as a fundamental semantic notion reflects a theoretical stance with respect to the most basic type of agency in linguistic encoding.

Finally, it is important to remember that both ergative-absolutive and stative-active languages tend to have "split systems" whereby a distinction that is made in one part of the grammatical system (e.g. between Agent and Actor) is not made in another (e.g. full nouns may require ergative marking whereas pronouns may function as if the language were nominative-accusative) (Dixon 1994; Mithun 1991). This means, then, that within the same language agency plays different roles, depending on the type of referent and the type of grammatical form available for a particular referent. A considerable body of literature in fact exists on ergative languages (Comrie 1978, 1981; Dixon 1979, 1994; Silverstein 1976a) and nominative-accusative languages (e.g. Hawkinson and Hyman 1974) on various "hierarchies" that try to capture precisely this type of phenomena, showing a recurrent continuum of "animacy" from first and second person pronouns (high animacy) to inanimate referents expressed through indefinite NPs (low animacy). One implication from these studies is that there are a number of (sometimes conflicting) factors conspiring toward making no grammatical 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 apparent inconsistencies (see Du Bois 1987 for an attempt to sketch out the discourse factors involved).

Much of the discussion of the encoding of agency and other semantic and pragmatic notions tends to be based on made-up examples and intuitions rather than on actual language usage. When we examine what people actually say, we end up with a different picture from the one drawn on the basis of linguistic intuitions.

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 is often 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 2001).[9] 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 creates agents out of non-human entities like plants and bureaucratic processes.[10] For example, newspaper articles in the USA 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):[11]

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

There are at least two observations that can be made on the basis of these examples. The first is that English speakers/writers are allowed to treat certain events that in some cases *may* have (example (20)) and in other cases *must* have (examples (21)–(25)) involved human agency as if no humans were involved. Sentences (20)–(25) illustrate the phenomenon of "mitigation" of agency discussed in section 5 below. The second observation is of a (weak) Whorfian kind, in the sense that it focuses on the implicit analogy that is being drawn in such constructions between non-human and human referents (Whorf 1941, 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 "causation" (roughly equivalent to my definition of "agency") to less prototypical situations, 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 Daniel Dennett, as a corollary of English grammatical usage: "the 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).

It might not be accidental that the theory according to which we, as rational beings, make predictions about the behavior of a tool (e.g. the thermostat) by

treating it as having beliefs and even intentions has been proposed by philosophers whose native language, English, allows for constructions like those in (20)–(25). A possible (Whorfian) project would be to find out whether speakers of different grammatical systems that do not as easily allow for similar constructions (e.g. Japanese, Samoan, Turkish) are less likely to accept the "intentionalist stance."

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 (1976, 2000), among others, tried to account for the fact 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 dealt with different grammatical framings through 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. In terms 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 all languages allow the choice between mentioning or not mentioning who is responsible for a given event or for a causal chain of events. There is a considerable body of literature on this subject, especially within the fields of pragmatics and functional linguistics. There seems to be some cross-linguistic evidence for the use of impersonal constructions as a means of mitigation (Berk-Seligson 1990: 99–100) and for the use of passive or passive-like constructions to avoid assigning blame to specific parties (Costa 1975; Kirsner 1976). We know, for example, that passive-like constructions in many languages are agent-less (e.g. Schlesinger 1989; Shibatani 1985) and that the majority of examples of passives in English discourse are also agent-less (Stubbs 1994). Here are three examples in a row from a passage in which a Teaching Assistant, addressing the students in a large auditorium, briefly discusses the problem of finding copies of the text(s) for the course:

(26) (UCSB, 11/14/95)
1 TA: the books came in and **they were sent back**.
2 there was a mistake and **they were sent back** and
3 **they had to be sent again**

Given that the same speaker in a previous utterance was trying to make the students themselves responsible for getting the books (he had said: *there were problems getting*

the book but at no time was it ever said that you would not be responsible for it), we could reasonably argue that in this type of situation the use of the agent-less passive construction (e.g. *they were sent back*) allows the speaker to avoid blaming anyone in particular about the problem of the missing textbooks.

These observations should not be understood as implying that passives are the best solution to the problem of avoiding mentioning the 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 1995b; Lyons 1977: 823) and alternative expressions of the role of Agent.

Bybee, Perkins, and Pagliuca (1994) identify four types of "agent-oriented modality"[12] expressed in languages: (i) obligation, (ii) necessity, (iii) ability, and (iv) desire. They discuss a number of resources for representing speakers' knowledge as well as speakers' stance with respect to events and states of affairs. For example, the use of modal verbs such as the English *must*, *should*, *may* provides hearers with a sense of how speakers are representing their own as well as others' obligations within a primarily language-constructed (actually discourse-constructed) moral world. The use of volition predicates like *want*, *would*, *would like*, *wish* make certain internal psychological states available to others for understanding and evaluation.

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 be easily extended to other languages. For example, it is not uncommon for a potential Agent to appear as a modifier of a non-Agent NP. Compare (a) and (b) in the following examples:

(27) a. John's speech was very long.
b. John gave a very long speech.
(28) a. This plate of fruit came from our neighbors.
b. Our neighbors sent/brought us this plate of fruit.

Too little is known at the moment about the context of use of constructions of this kind across languages for us to build a model of exactly how they play a role in the mitigation of agency, but there is no question that perspective or point of view is at work here.

A possible direction for future research is to expand our horizon of theoretical and empirical research to include an understanding of these 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 grammatical framing (Duranti 1994).

6 Conclusions

In this chapter I have brought together a number of traditions in the study of agency, including the work of sociologists, anthropologists, philosophers, and grammarians. On the basis of these studies, I have proposed a working definition of agency that should apply across the spectrum, that is, that should satisfy those interested in social structure and those interested in linguistic framing. Starting from the definition of agency given in (1), I have identified two types of agency, which I called *performance* and *encoding*. I have suggested that although it is important to separate these two types for analytical purposes, they are actually mutually dependent, with encoding being an important element of performance and vice versa. Within the performance type, I have identified two subtypes: *ego-affirming* and *act-constituting* agency. Within the encoding of agency, I have concentrated on the role of agency in defining different types of grammatical patterns (e.g. nominative-accusative versus ergative-absolutive) offered by typologically different languages. I used English as an example of a language in which the subject position is quite open to a variety of semantic roles and in which, therefore, agency can be metaphorically extended to semantic roles and situations in ways that would not be possible to conceive in other languages. I have used Samoan as an example of an ergative-absolutive language in which (for full NPs) a sharp distinction is made between Agent NPs and other kinds of roles. I have also briefly looked at so-called stative-active languages and suggested that their existence provides support for a wider, more open category of agency (and Agent), where we might include entities that do not have an obvious impact on others or on their environment (i.e. that the presence of a malleable Object other than the participant in the Subject role might not be a necessary condition for agency to be recognized). I have also pointed out that no language is perfectly consistent in any given type and the same language might in fact encode agency in different ways, according to the type of referent NPs that are being talked about.

Finally, on the basis of the existing typology of grammatical systems, I have proposed two generalizations (potential universals of language structure): (i) the centrality of agency in languages (all languages have grammatical structures that seem designed to represent agency) and (ii) the diversity of the encoding of agency (alternative ways of marking agency are available both across languages and within the same language). On the basis of existing data on how grammatical systems are actually used by speakers in spoken and written discourse, two further generalizations can be added: (iii) the universality of the mitigation of agency (all languages have ways of reducing or "modulating" the level of agency of certain participants) and (iv) the universality of the omission of agency (all languages have ways of omitting altogether the sources of agency).

When seen together, these four generalizations suggest that the encoding of agency is both an important and a potentially problematic act for speakers. These

two qualities are tied to what I would call the *inevitability of agency* for humans. There is inevitability at the existential level (ego-affirming), performative level (act-constituting), and grammatical level (encoding). At each of these three levels, agency is either the goal or the result of a person's being-in-the-world. It is this multi-level inevitability that, more than anything else, gives language its claim to power and it is this claim that linguistic anthropologists have been studying for over a century. The integration of social theory and linguistic analysis offered in this chapter continues in that tradition.

NOTES

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1 "By the duality of structure, I mean the essential recursiveness of social life, as constituted in social practices: structure is both medium and outcome of the reproduction of practices. Structure enters simultaneously into the constitution of the agent and social practices, and 'exists' in the generating moments of this constitution" (Giddens 1979: 5).

2 I will use the standard linguistic convention of capitalizing the names of semantic roles like Agent, Object (or Patient), Instrument, etc.

3 For a series of succinct statements and references to these concepts, see Banti (2001), Beeman (2001), Ben-Amos (2001), Feld and Fox (1994, 2001), Hoëm (2001).

4 There is a long tradition of studies in folklore, linguistic anthropology, and literary studies on this dimension, e.g. Bauman (1975); Briggs and Bauman (1992); Hymes (1975); Palmer and Jankowiak (1996).

5 Abbreviations used in interlinear glosses: ART = article; ERG = ergative; INST = Instrument/Cause; PRES = present; PST = past; TA = tense/aspect marker; EMP = emphatic particle.

6 In some ergative languages (e.g. Dyirbal and some other Australian Aboriginal languages), the ergative marker has the same phonological shape as the instrumental marker. This coincidence of form suggests a possible conceptualization based on a larger category of causality, which does not involve volition or control. At the same time, it is also possible that the similarity is only very superficial and a more detailed analysis may reveal that although marked by the same surface form, Agents and Instruments display certain important differences. This is indeed the argument presented by Dixon (1972) for Dyirbal.

7 Dowty (1991) provides a prototype definition of Agent:
   a. volitional involvement in the event or state
   b. sentence [sic, read "sentience"] (and/or perception)
   c. causing an event or change of state in another participant
   d. movement (rel. to the position of another participant)
   e. exists independently of the event named by the verb.

   For a prototypical definition of causation, see Lakoff and Johnson (1980). On Agents within the context of the grammar and meaning of causation, see also Talmy (1976, 2000).

8 Even though he does not use cross-linguistic comparison in his discussion, Jackendoff's more recent use of the term "Actor" (1990) over "Agent" (1972) suggests that he sees agency along lines similar to the conceptualization found in active-stative languages.

9 This lack of Agents in discourse has been documented for other languages as well. For Samoan, see Duranti (1981, 1990, 1994), Duranti and Ochs (1990), Ochs (1988). However, cross-linguistic comparison is made difficult in this area because in languages with so-called "zero anaphora" (i.e. with no overt pronouns to represent certain NP arguments of the verb, at least in some constructions) it is often difficult to tell whether the unexpressed Agent is identifiable or not.

10 I am treating here what Levinson (1995: 224) calls "animistic and interactional thinking" as a by-product of the syntax and semantics of English (and presumably other languages, but not all).

11 "[. . .]" indicates that a portion of the longer sentence or paragraph has been omitted.

12 "Agent-oriented modality reports the existence of internal and external conditions on an agent with respect to the completion of the action expressed in the main predicate. As a report, the agent-oriented modality is part of the propositional content of the clause and thus would not be considered a modality in most frameworks" (Bybee, Perkins, and Pagliuca 1994: 177).

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