

Linguistic Anthropology (Antropoloxia Lingüística)

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To appear in Manual de Lingüística Xeral, edited by Fernando Fernández Ramallo, Gabriel Rei Doval, and Xoan Paulo Rodríguez-Yanez. Vigo: Edición Xerais de Galicia.

LINGUISTIC ANTHROPOLOGY -- Alessandro Duranti

1. DEFINITION AND HISTORY

Linguistic anthropology is dedicated to the study of language as the instrument of culture, that is, as the voice, tool, and foundation of any human experience. Such experience is given meaning by one or more cultural traditions and helps reproduce (and change) such traditions. Hence, the object of study for linguistic anthropology is language as a resource and speaking as a practice. Language is a resource for a number of cognitive and social tasks, including problem-solving, narrating, and managing relationships with other members of the community. Speaking is a practice through which social actors accomplish a number of goals including making sense of their life. Every human being must answer such questions as: what is going on here and now? Language helps us answer that question, most of the time implicitly, some times explicitly.

The methods of linguistic anthropologists consist in the careful documentation of what speakers do as social actors engaged in a range of daily activities. This documentation crucially includes ethnography, that is, participant observation of daily practices and the documentation of a reliable corpus of communicative practices. In contemporary studies, this documentation is accomplished through a range of techniques, including audio and video recording, annotated transcription (Schieffelin 1990), and interviews with the participants in the events we study (see Duranti 1997: ch. 4 and 5).

Linguistic anthropology is one of the four traditional branches of anthropology -- the other three being archaeological, biological (formerly physical), and sociocultural anthropology (or ethnology¹) -- within the North American holistic tradition established by Franz Boas (1858-1942) at the beginning of the twentieth century.

In Europe, linguistics and anthropology remained rigidly separate disciplines for the first half of the twentieth century, after which time the term "ethnolinguistics" enjoyed a brief period of popularity (cf. Cardona 1976). Although some of the work of European folklorists and other students of oral traditions speaks to linguistic anthropologists' concerns in North America, European departments of anthropology rarely include linguists. This means that the European linguists who have research interests similar to those of North American linguistic anthropologists tend to be housed in departments of linguistics or in departments of foreign languages and literatures.

In the United States, the rapid development of autonomous linguistics departments in the 1960's and 1970's, which flourished under the banner of the Chomskian "Revolution" -- i.e. a call for the study of language as an innate cognitive faculty --, negatively impacted the presence of linguistics within anthropology. Once the assumption was made that anthropology students could be trained in the study of language by taking courses in the new and rapidly growing linguistics departments, many departments of anthropology decided to discontinue their linguistic subfield. This belief was partly supported by the development of a new and related field:

¹ Ethnology is the term used in Continental Europe for the study of culture. The difference in naming practices between North America and Europe is partly associated with the fact that in Europe the term "anthropology" is often understood as referring to physical anthropology, which is housed in a separate department.

sociolinguistics, which borrowed methodologies from a number of fields, including dialectology, quantitative (i.e. macro-) sociology, interactional sociology, and generative grammar (for the formal notation). As the senior linguists in the anthropology departments retired, they were not always replaced with a new and younger generation. In fact, only a selected number of departments of anthropology in the 1970's and 1980's remained faithful to the old "four field" approach and even fewer were among those that had viable doctoral programs for training a new generation of linguistic anthropologists. In the last decade, the situation has changed and we are seeing what amounts to a rebirth of the field of linguistic anthropology. More and more departments are reversing the earlier policy of exclusion of linguistic anthropologists and the number of linguists in anthropology departments is increasing (while in some universities there may be linguistic anthropologists housed in other departments, e.g. linguistics, sociology, communication). A thorough analysis of this rebirth is beyond the scope of this article, but a few hypotheses should be mentioned. First, we might hypothesize that anthropologists realized that the kind of linguistics currently practiced and taught in most linguistics departments is too narrow to be useful to anthropology students (this is probably the case outside of the U.S. as well). Second, the range of research projects within the field of linguistic anthropology has widened. Linguistic anthropologists have been writing on poetics, narrative, special registers (e.g. honorifics, taboo words), linguistic taxonomies (e.g. color terminology), literacy, and language change. They have also been applying their analytical skills to a number of topics that have a more immediate connection with contemporary social issues. Such topics include the construction of social identity in multilingual and multicultural communities, the relation between theories of mind and interpretive

practices, the implications of migration patterns on communication across generations, language use in the media, and language socialization at home, in school, and in the workplace. Overall, this expanded research horizon has made linguistic anthropology more appealing to students of social systems in anthropology and other social sciences.

1.1 The beginning of the discipline

Linguistic anthropology in North America was born with two goals. The first was the documentation of languages that had no written tradition and might have been in danger of extinction for political, military, or ideological reasons.² The second was the enrichment of anthropological research through the direct access to native speakers instead of translators. The first goal, which was part of the so-called “salvaging anthropology,” produced a number of grammatical descriptions and in some cases full-scale grammars, especially of American Indian languages. The second goal, to utilize native languages as tools for research, produced texts that were later used to write ethnographies (often of past traditions) and comparative analysis of cultural practices. In order to collect and analyze such texts, anthropologists needed to be fairly sophisticated in linguistic analysis³.

² “Many among the American languages are spoken by a few old persons, sometimes by a single person. With their deaths the languages will be extinct. Not a few are gone, and there is no possibility of recovering them. It would seem a duty of our time to recover whatever can be saved in the two Americas, particularly in our own country.” (Boas 1939, quoted in Hymes 1964: 8).

³ Ironically, the establishment of participant observation as the building block of empirical field research in the 1920’s and 1930’s reduced the reliance on native texts as sources for ethnographic descriptions. Although anthropologists continued to collect native taxonomies (e.g. kinship terms, names of plants and animals), myths, and legends from informants, over time informants’ (transcribed) accounts of past practices were replaced by direct observation of current practices. One of the consequences of this shift was that readers could no longer have direct access to the sources (i.e. the texts) utilized by ethnographers for their accounts.

If ethnology is understood as the science dealing with the mental phenomenon of the life of the peoples of the world, human language, one of the most important manifestations of mental life, would seem to belong naturally to the field of work of ethnology... (Boas 1911: 52)

For Boas, human language is particularly useful to the student of culture because speakers are usually unconscious of linguistic rules and functions. Since speakers don't have a theory of why they speak the way they do, researchers do not have to deal with secondary explanations⁴ (Boas 1911: 59).

Consistently with his cultural relativism, Boas believed that each language should be studied on its own terms rather than according to some pre-set categories based on the study of other, genetically unrelated languages (e.g. Latin). In his Introduction to the Handbook of American Indian Languages (1911), Boas provided an overview of the grammatical categories and linguistic units necessary for the analysis of American Indian languages while arguing against overgeneralizations that would obscure differences across languages. He identified the sentence (as opposed to the word) as the unit for the expression of ideas in any language and listed a number of grammatical categories that are likely to be found in all languages, but pointed out that the material content of words (the meaning of lexical items) is language-specific.

⁴ Secondary explanations are attempts to provide a reason for a particular cultural custom that otherwise would remain unexplained. An example given by Boas is the danger of cutting one's lips as an explanation for the custom against bringing the knife to the mouth that is found in a number of societies. The fact that the custom exists in societies where the knives are dull and forks have sharp teeth would suggest that the danger of hurting oneself is a secondary explanation.

It seems important ... to emphasize the fact that the groups of ideas expressed by specific phonetic groups show very material differences in different languages, and do not conform by any means to the same principles of classification. (Boas 1911: 19)

Boas gave as examples the different ways of giving expression to the idea of WATER in English (e.g. lake, river, brook, rain, dew, wave, foam) and the four different words for SNOW in Eskimo⁵. These examples are used by Boas not so much to emphasize the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign (a theme usually attributed to the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure), but to point out that differences in classification of reality across languages might be due to the diversity of speakers' interests. The relation between linguistic classification and speakers' worldview became a more central part of the research agenda of the generations to follow (see below).

Boas also argued against the idea that speakers of American Indian languages are less accurate in their pronunciation than speakers of European languages. He showed that this false perception has to do with a poor understanding of the phonetic inventory of these languages and the ways in which sounds alternated in certain positions. Although Boas maintained the label "primitive languages" in writing about American Indian languages, he demonstrated that there are no grounds for conceiving of these languages as really primitive. They are just as systematic and complex as the more well known and (at the time) better studied European languages. The concern for establishing the universality of the language capacity for all human groups continued in the writings of Boas' student Edward Sapir (1884-1939), as

⁵ See Martin (1986) for the uses and (mostly) abuses of this example.

demonstrated by the opening paragraph in his article on "language" for the Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences:

The gift of speech and a well ordered language are characteristic of every known group of human beings. No tribe has ever been found which is without language, and all statements to the contrary may be dismissed as mere folklore. There seems to be no warrant whatever for the statement which is sometimes made that there are certain people whose vocabulary is so limited that they cannot get on without the supplementary use of gesture so that intelligible communication between members of such a group becomes impossible in the dark. The truth of the matter is that language is an essentially perfect means of expression and communication among every known people. Of all aspects of culture, it is a fair guess that language was the first to receive a highly developed form and that its essential perfection is a prerequisite to the development of culture as a whole. ([1933] 1963: 7)

Once the existence of "primitive" languages had been disproved, it was language as an instrument of culture that became the main proccupation of linguistic anthropologists for the rest of the twentieth century. One intellecual path was the testing of what became known as the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis or linguistic relativity.

2. LINGUISTIC RELATIVITY

Linguistic relativity is a general term by which people refer to a number of different assumptions and hypotheses about the relationship between

language and culture (Hill 1988a; Hill and Mannheim 1992). In one version, it is argued that since the linguistic representation of the world is arbitrary, each language constitutes a system that is sui generis and as such incommensurable with other systems, i.e. other languages. Another version claims that such linguistic diversity has implications for perceiving and thinking. These ideas, which were first clearly articulated by the German diplomat and linguist Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835), were popularized in the United States and elsewhere through what came to be known as the "Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis"⁶ (see Koerner 1992 for a review of the literature). In fact, Sapir and Whorf differed in their discussion of the relationship between language and culture and each had his own version of linguistic relativity.

For Sapir, linguistic relativity was a way of articulating an issue that occupied much of his intellectual quest, namely, the struggle between the individual and society (Hill 1988b; Sapir 1994). In his lectures and writings, Sapir came to the realization of the following paradox: in order to communicate their unique experiences, individuals need to rely on a code over which they have very little control. It is in this context that we should try to understand Sapir's statement on the "tyrannical hold" of language over thought:

Language is not merely a more or less systematic inventory of the various items of experience which seem relevant to the individual, as is so often naïvely assumed, but is also a self-contained, creative symbolic organization, which not only refers to experience largely

⁶ Hill and Mannheim (1992) argued that it would be more appropriate to speak of an "axiom" rather than of a "hypothesis."

acquired without its help but actually defines experience for us by reason of its formal completeness and because of our unconscious projection of its implicit expectations into the field of experience. [...] Such categories as number, gender, case, tense, mode, voice, "aspect" and a host of others, many of which are not recognized systematically in our Indo-European languages, are, of course, derivative of experience at last analysis, but, once abstracted from experience, they are systematically elaborated in language and are not so much discovered in experience as imposed upon it because of the tyrannical hold that linguistic form has upon our orientation in the world.

(1964:128)

The reference to "linguistic form" is particularly important here. Sapir believed that language can control our way of expressing our thoughts because of the arbitrary nature of linguistic categories and distinctions. He saw the unique logic of linguistic systems (e.g. the distinctions in number, gender, case, etc.) as similar to aesthetic canons (Sapir was an accomplished and published poet).

Every language is itself a collective art of expression. There is concealed in it a particular set of esthetic factors – phonetic, rhythmic, symbolic, morphological – which it does not completely share with any other language. (Sapir 1923: 225)

Just as we cannot easily give functional explanations of aesthetic forms and aesthetic taste, we cannot easily give a functional explanation (e.g. in

terms of communicative needs) for why languages behave the way they do.⁷ Linguistic rules are usually unconscious but with an internal coherence (Lucy 1992a:23). It is this coherence that makes it difficult for individual speakers to enter the logic of the linguistic system and alter it to their liking. Sapir ([1927] 1949a) illustrates this point with the marking of plural in English. There seem to be no functional reasons for the use of plural with nouns that are accompanied by numerals. Hence, why do English speakers need to say five men instead of *five man? For Sapir, it is a question of aesthetic taste (or, as he says in the following quote, "feeling"): "English, like all of the other Indo-European languages, has developed a feeling for the classification of all expressions which have a nominal form into singulars and plurals." (Sapir 1949a: 550) There are other languages, however, like Chinese, where nouns are not marked for number. In such languages, when there is a need to be precise, numerals (e.g. words for "five," "ten") and quantifiers (e.g. "all," "several") can be used to carry the meaning of plurality. Furthermore, in some cases languages may differ in terms of what they consider countable and hence deserving plural marking.

Crosslinguistic comparison then reveals the arbitrary nature of the grammatical distinction between singular and plural and its taken-for-granted necessity in the minds of those speakers of languages that do have such a feature. The incommensurability of different grammars is typically revealed in borrowings, where the logic of one grammatical system is imposed on and therefore ignores the logic of another. For example, English speakers add

⁷ It should be pointed out here that the second part of the twentieth century saw the establishment of a strong functional tradition in linguistics that tries to explain grammatical forms in terms of communicative needs or discourse functions (e.g. Hopper & Thompson 1980; Givón 1989; Hopper & Traugott 1993). Paradoxically, the argument in favor of the autonomous nature of linguistic forms has not been pursued by linguistic anthropologists but by formal grammarians who have shown little or no interest in the relationship between language and culture.

English plural morphology to borrowings from languages that have other endings for plural and ignore the plural ending of words for referents that they consider mass nouns and therefore not countable entities. The Italian cappuccino and espresso become, in English, cappuccinos and espressos in the plural, despite the fact that these two words have a different plural ending in Italian, i.e. cappuccini and espressi. On the other hand, the original plural ending of the Italian word spaghetti, which indicates that for Italians this is a countable entity, is ignored by English speakers who treat it as a mass noun, hence the difference between the English this spaghetti is good and the Italian questi spaghetti sono buoni (literally 'these spaghetti are good').⁸ The question is whether such a difference implies that English speakers and Italian speakers differ in the way in which they think of the same referent (i.e. spaghetti).

Despite his claim that language is a "guide" to social reality (Sapir 1949b: 162), Sapir did not fully articulate how language could have an impact on culture and how we could test such a hypothesis. This task was left for Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897-1941), a chemical engineer who worked as an insurance inspector while pursuing a number of intellectual quests, among which linguistics (see Carroll 1956; Lucy 1992a: 24). Whorf taught himself linguistics and after 1931 entered in contact with Sapir and his students at Yale (Darnell 1990). Although Whorf started out sharing several of the basic positions held by Boas and Sapir on the nature of linguistic classification, he developed his own conceptual apparatus and his own version of the linguistic relativity hypothesis. This apparatus included the important distinction between overt and covert grammatical categories (Whorf 1956a;

⁸ Similar phenomena occur in Italian borrowings from English. Italian speakers form the plural of English words of words like film, computer, by simply adding the plural article and leaving out the final -s: i film, i computer, i manager.

see also Duranti 1997: 58-9; Lucy 1992a:26-31). Overt categories are marked in the morphology of the word or in accompanying words. For example, in Spanish gender is an overt category because it is usually given by the ending of the noun (e.g. -o vs. -a) or by a number of accompanying elements, e.g. the article (el vs. la). In English, instead, gender tends to be a covert category that is made explicit when we refer to the noun with a personal pronoun. When someone says I just met a friend of mine, we don't have a way of inferring the gender of the "friend." Only if a personal pronoun is used next, we will know whether the friend in question is a man or a woman (I just met a friend of mine. She has just moved here). The distinction between overt and covert, which was a precursor of Chomsky's distinction between surface and deep structure, is an important analytical tool for understanding what kinds of categorical distinctions speakers are sensitive to. Hence, for Whorf the focus of comparative analysis between languages was not the number of words for the same referent (e.g. snow) but the implications that different grammatical systems and different lexicons have for the way in which we make inferences about the way the world is. On the basis of his comparison of the grammar of Hopi with the grammar of English and some other European languages, Whorf posited the "linguistic relativity principle," by which he meant

that users of markedly different grammars are pointed by their grammars toward different types of observations and different evaluations of extremely similar acts of observation, and hence are not equivalent as observers but must arrive at somewhat different views of the world. (1956b: 221)

This "principle" generated a considerable amount of research mostly by linguistic anthropologists and psycholinguists (see Lucy 1992a). After a period of harsh criticism of Whorf's work and disillusion with the possibility of testing the linguistic relativity principle, researchers have recently returned to Whorf's basic insights with renewed interest and more sophisticated theoretical insights (Hill and Mannheim 1992). An important contribution in this area has been John Lucy's (1992b) project comparing the performance of speakers of Yucatec and speakers of English in a series of cognitive tasks. Lucy's basic assumption was that certain differences between Yucatec and English grammar should result in the two groups of speakers attending to different properties of objects. Concentrating on number (that is, plural marking), he started from the observation that whereas English marks plural overtly and obligatorily on a wide range of noun phrases, Yucatec usually does not mark plural and when it does -- for a small range of noun phrases --, it is optional. This difference can be used to hypothesize that "English speakers should habitually attend to the number of various objects of reference more than should Yucatec speakers. (Lucy 1992b: 87, emphasis in the original) Furthermore, whereas English marks plural for both animate referents (e.g. humans, animals) and inanimate discrete referents, Yucatec marks plural (optionally) only for animate referents. Hence, "English speakers should habitually attend to number for a wider array of referent types than should Yucatan speakers." (Lucy 1992b: 87) More specifically, whereas English speakers should pay attention to number for animate beings and discrete objects, Yucatec speakers should pay attention to number only for animate beings. A third hypothesis was built on the use and distribution of classifiers (these are nouns or particles that many languages employ to encode information on the type of category represented by a given noun). Yucatec

nouns that take a plural marker need to be accompanied by a classifier. Thus, whereas in English one can say three men (numeral+noun), in Yucatec, one must say 'numeral (óos)+human classifier (túul)+man (máak).' This constraint is similar to the one for so-called mass nouns in English (e.g. sugar, cotton, zinc), which also need classifiers to be modified by a numeral. One cannot say *two cottons, but must say two balls of cotton (Lucy 1992b: 73).

From these observations Lucy inferred that many English lexical items presuppose a unit as part of their meaning and for this reason no classifier is needed, whereas Yucatec lexical items do not presuppose a unit. The unit presupposed by English lexical nouns referring to inanimate objects tends to be the form or shape of the object (Lucy 1992b:89). Yucatec nouns, instead, have no such presupposed unit and their meaning implies types of substance or material composition. For example, in Yucatec the same word che' 'wood' is used to form words referring to objects that have different shapes but are made out of wood substance such as 'tree, stick, board.' This is a different lexical strategy from the one adopted in English, where objects of the same substance (wood) but different shapes are referred to with different lexical items, e.g. tree, stick, board, table, shelf. (This is the same phenomenon illustrated by Boas's example of the distinct lexical items through which English expresses the shapes of WATER: lake, river, brook, rain, dew, wave, foam). From these considerations, Lucy (1992b:89) hypothesized that "English speakers should attend relatively more to the shape of objects and Yucatec speakers should attend relatively more to the material composition of objects in other cognitive activities" (emphasis in the original). These hypotheses were tested with a series of tasks involving recognition and recollection of pictures where the number of items (people, animals, tools) and various substances (corn, firewood, rock) varied. The results demonstrated that indeed

English speakers and Yucatec speakers differ in how they categorize and recall different types of referents. For example, English speakers tend to group objects in terms of common shape whereas Yucatec speakers tend to group them in terms of common substance (e.g. wood, water). "These patterns suggest that the underlying lexical structures associated with the number marking in the two languages have an influence on the nonverbal interpretation of objects." (Lucy 1992a: 157)

More work on the relationship between language and cognition is being done at the Max Planck Institute under the direction of Stephen Levinson who launched a comparative study of the ways in which space is conceptualized across typologically different languages (Levinson 1992). Gumperz and Levinson (1991) is a position paper on the state of the art in linguistic relativity which led to a 1991 Wenner-Gren conference where a number of leading scholars in anthropology, linguistics, and psychology reconsidered some of the basic issues and implications of Whorf's original ideas about language and habitual thought (Gumperz and Levinson 1996).

3. LANGUAGE AS A CULTURAL PRACTICE

Most of the studies on linguistic relativity reviewed so far focus on the structural properties of linguistic systems. In this line of research, language is fundamentally understood as a taxonomic system whereby the experiential world (of the objects and people around us, of our actions and emotions) is classified in distinct (and partly arbitrary) units. Such classifications are interpreted by speakers and researchers alike as ready-to-use tools first and foremost for thinking and only secondarily for acting in the world. A

different line of research within linguistic anthropology has been influenced by Hymes' (1964) call for an ethnography of communicative events. Hymes encouraged his students and others to blend ethnographic and linguistic methods in order to produce descriptive accounts of how language is used in particular communities. The focus on communicative events (later replaced by speech events [Hymes 1972a]) was as an invitation to understand language use through the study of the speech activities that members engage in. This perspective was implied in Hymes's (1966) call for a kind of linguistic relativity based on how people use language and how they think of it. For example, he pointed out that not all people think of names in the same way and not all communities accept variation in the same way.

3.1 Communicative competence

By the time Hymes launched his call for an ethnographic study of language use across speech communities, a new theoretical paradigm had emerged in linguistics: generative grammar. This was mostly due to the writing of one scholar: Noam Chomsky, who attacked behaviorist conceptions of language (Chomsky 1959) and the former structuralist paradigm of linguists like Leonard Bloomfield and Charles Hockett. Chomsky's model was mentalistic, in the sense that it was "concerned with discovering a mental reality underlying actual behavior." (Chomsky 1965: 4) The mentalistic perspective was represented by his distinction between competence (knowledge) and performance (use). Realizing that this distinction presented a number of problems for anthropological studies of language, Hymes proposed an alternative research paradigm. Chomsky's

notion of competence as tacit (typically unconscious) knowledge of grammatical rules was replaced with the notion of communicative competence, which includes both tacit knowledge and ability to use language (Hymes 1972b: 282). Starting from a commonsense notion of competence, Hymes argued that speakers are 'competent' not only when they have the knowledge of grammatical rules but also when they have the knowledge of how to use them appropriately. Acquiring a language, then, requires more than learning how to produce grammatical sentences. In acquiring a language, "a child becomes able to accomplish a repertoire of speech acts, to take part in speech events, and to evaluate their accomplishment by others." (Hymes 1972b: 277) To be a member of a particular community, one must know when to speak and when not to speak, how to be polite, how to request or offer collaboration, how to sound calm, surprised, interested, concerned, and so forth. Furthermore, not all members of the speech community have access to the same knowledge. Not everyone knows how to deliver a lecture or how to understand a clinician's diagnosis. Rather than focus on the innate aspects of linguistic competence -- the universal capacity for language acquisition assumed by Chomsky and demonstrated by a number of empirical studies --, Hymes shifted the focus on the diversity that is apparent as soon as we go and study how language is used in any speech community. Rather than ignoring differences for the sake of easier generalizing, an anthropological program for the study of language must start from the assumption of heterogeneity (Duranti 1997: ch. 3).

It was sociolinguistics that first cast a doubt on Chomsky's (1965) "ideal speaker-hearer" and showed that even within monolingual communities, there is considerable amount of individual and societal variation, that is, variation that can be correlated with variables such as social class, age, and sex

of speakers (Labov 1966, 1972). Despite the fact that scholars like John Gumperz had been working on language contact since the late 1950's, it was not until the 1980's that linguistic anthropologists became intellectually engaged with the issue of heterogeneity. This shift was partly due to the difficulty of ignoring the linguistic effects of new and massive immigration and the globalization of economic markets. At the same time, there were new intellectual sources that allowed a reconceptualization of "language"; among them the writings of Mikhael Bakhtin were particularly influential (Bakhtin 1981, 1984, 1986; Voloshinov 1973). In his analysis of the novel, Bakhtin (1981: 261) argued that investigators are confronted with a variety of coexisting styles, which represent different "voices" (the author's, the characters'). It is through these voices that language as a fundamentally stratified and differentiated code, what he called heteroglossia (Russian raznorecie), can enter the novel. In this perspective the notion of a unitary language is not just a working hypothesis, as proposed by Chomsky, but an ideological stance, which hides from us the inequality inherent in any linguistic system as well as the potential and actual aesthetic effects of the juxtaposition of multiple voices and coexisting language varieties. This work inspired a number of linguistic anthropologists including Jane and Kenneth Hill, whose notion of syncretic language to describe language use and language ideology among Mexicano (Nahuatl) speakers is based on Bakhtin's writings (Hill and Hill 1986; on language ideology see also Schieffelin, Woolard & Kroskrity 1998; Silverstein 1979; Woolard & Schieffelin 1994).

3.2 Performance

The reframing of the notion of competence came with a rethinking of the notion of performance. Chomsky's view of performance was guided by two assumptions. The first was that to speak of performance meant to speak of perception and production. The second was that the scientific method requires us to ignore performance because it is subject to "memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors (random or characteristic)" (Chomsky 1965: 3). Borrowing from a number of authors, including Kenneth Burke and Erving Goffman, Hymes revised and extended Chomsky's notion of performance to include something more than the behavioral record of what speakers do when they talk. For Hymes, like for folklorists and aesthetic anthropologists, performance is a realm of social action, which emerges out of the interaction with other speakers and as such is not reduceable to the use of the linguistic knowledge controlled by an individual (Hymes 1972b: 283). This concept is further clarified in Hymes ([1975] 1981: 81-2), where he states that "The concern is with performance, not as something mechanical or inferior, as in some linguistic discussion, but with performance as something creative, realized, achieved, even transcendent of the ordinary course or events" (cfr. also Duranti 1997: 14-17). This perspective has strongly influenced contemporary research in linguistic anthropology (Bauman 1977; Bauman and Briggs 1992; Beeman 1993; Caton 1990; Kuipers 1990; Palmer and Jankowiak 1996).

The view of speakers as performers allows us to broaden the analytical horizon of language use in a number of ways. First, it recognizes the creative dimension of any act of speaking, which means that ordinary language is not that far from poetic language. Metaphors abound in all kinds of speech situations -- that is, almost no part of what we say can be taken to be "literal" - - and both child and adult conversation is full of parallelism and other poetic

devices (Goodwin & Goodwin 1987; Lakoff 1987; Lakoff & Johnson 1980; Ochs & Schieffelin 1983; Silverstein 1984). If it is true, as argued by Friedrich (1986), that there is a poet in each of us, one of the goals of any serious study of language use implies not only the identification of the special features that go into great verbal art but also the search for the creative uses of language in everyday talk. Contrary to popular belief, even scientists are not immune from the creative power of linguistic metaphors and other poetic devices and in fact routinely rely on them in their problem-solving activities. In their study of a physics laboratory in the U.S., Ochs, Gonzales and Jacoby (1996) found that physicists discussing experiments involving changes in temperature that bring about changes of "states" (e.g. from "paramagnetic" to "domain") attribute human qualities to physical entities saying things like this system has no knowledge of that system. At other times the physicists' language presents a blend of different identities: the researchers use personal pronouns (I, you) with predicates that refer to change of states undergone by particles: When I come down I'm in the domain state.

[W]hile the pronominal subject of these utterances presupposes an animate referent, the predicate appears to refer to a physical event or state attributable to an inanimate referent (i.e. the physical object under consideration) ... These utterances thus seem to have a semantically schizoid, illogical character which blurs the boundaries between the animate subject (physicist) and the inanimate object (physical entity/system). (Ochs, Gonzales and Jacoby 1996: 340)

Second, the view of speakers as performers also recognizes the role of individuals, their unique contribution to any given situation and to the

evolution of any linguistic tradition. This has been difficult to do within formal linguistics because the emphasis (from Saussure to Chomsky) has been on the linguistic system -- often described in terms of context-independent rules --, rather than on what specific speakers do with language in specific situations. The rationalist, scientific paradigm of contemporary formal linguistics has favored linguistic forms over their users because of the fear that a focus on individual performance would detract from the ability to make generalizations about language. This has meant considerable advances in our ability to describe linguistic systems and their putative rules but little progress in what we know about individual differences and the factors that go into linguistic creativity and linguistic change. As pointed out by Barbara Johnstone (1996: 19), "[t]hinking about language from the perspective of the individual requires a pragmatics that deals centrally with newness and idiosyncrasy rather than a pragmatics in which conventionality is the focus."

Third, the focus on performance recognizes the role of the audience in the construction of messages and their meanings, a point that has been at the center of a number of recent and not-so-recent enterprises, including hermeneutics (Gadamer 1986), Bakhtin's dialogism (Bakhtin 1981; Voloshinov 1973), and conversation analysis (Goodwin 1981; Schegloff 1972, 1986). Linguistic anthropologists are particularly interested in identifying the dimensions of speaking that are context-dependent and those that are context-creating (Silverstein 1976), although at this point it makes sense to suppose that both qualities enter, albeit in different amounts, in each act of speaking. At any given time, speakers may have at their disposal not just one or more codes (for example, English as opposed English and Korean) but a vast range of registers, genres, routines, activities, expressions, accents, prosodic and paralinguistic features (e.g. volume, tempo, rhythm, voice quality) that

constitute what Gumperz (1964) called repertoire. The choice that speakers make are partly due to their repertoire, which is acquired through life experiences and keeps changing through the life cycle partly due to one's social network (L. Milroy 1987; Milroy and Milroy 1992), including the effects of schooling, profession, and a person's special interests. An attention to the audience and the construction of messages across speakers, turns, and channels also recast a new light on the view of speaking as the expression of an individual's intentions (Du Bois 1993; Duranti 1993a, 1993b). For one thing, what is said rarely belongs to only one speaker:

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

Furthermore, our original intentions must be constantly updated by the effect we make on our interlocutors, their knowledge of background knowledge (Goodwin 1981), and their willingness or ability to go down the interpretive path we have sketched up to that point. When an audience treats as humorous something that was meant to be serious, the speaker must confront a difficult choice: whether to reclaim his original interpretive key ("this is meant to be serious") or adapt ("this is meant to be funny").

3.3 Indexicality

One of the most important areas of research in the last three decades within linguistic anthropology has been indexicality. This is the property of those signs that the philosopher Charles Peirce called indices (now called indexes), that is, signs that have an existential relation (spatial or temporal) with their referent (Burks 1948-49). The classic examples are deictic terms like I, you, this, that, now, later, up, down, today, yesterday, etc., that is, words that need reference to the context of speaking in order to be interpreted. According to Peirce, words like this and that are indices because "they call upon the hearer to use his powers of observation, and so establish a real connection between his mind and the object" (Peirce 1940:110). It is the need to establish a connection between the speaker's mind and the objects/people/places in the real world that interests linguistic anthropologists, who have been arguing that indexicality is not only restricted to deictic terms but is a pervasive property of speaking in general. Everything we say needs a context to be interpretable and, in turn, everything we say helps create or sustain a given context. Building on Peirce's and Roman Jakobson's work, Silverstein (1976) suggested that there is a scale of creativity among different indexes. There are those indexes that depend on their context to be interpreted -- for example, the word here in Bob wants to come here -- and there are indexes that, in turn, help construct their context -- for example, the use of certain address terms (Mr. President, Your Honor, Professor) constructs a person as deserving respect or the situation as one in which certain institutional roles are activated. A particularly rich area for the study of the indexical properties of human languages has been honorifics, that is, those special linguistic forms (phrases, words, or morphemes) that are used in a number of languages to

express deference toward a referent, an addressee, a participant, a situation (Agha 1994). In the most common cases, some linguistic form is used to recognize the hearer/addressee's higher status. In many European languages, this function is reserved for the distinction between what Brown and Gilman (1960) call the "T" form (Spanish and Italian tu, German du) and the "V" form (Spanish Usted, Italian Lei or Voi, German Sie) (addressee honorifics). In some languages, a special lexicon is used when talking about high status individuals (referent honorifics). In Samoa, this lexicon is called `upu fa'aaloalo "respectful words" (Duranti 1992) and comprises hundreds of words, most of which are only used in ceremonial contexts -- hence, they are an important element of the constitution of an event as 'ceremonial' or 'formal'. Honorifics have also been talked about as negotiating relationships of avoidance. This is obviously the case for the so-called "mother-in-law" or "brother-in-law" languages in Australian Aboriginal societies (Dixon 1972; Haviland 1979a, 1979b), but it might be at work for any situation involving a differential status between participants. There are also languages that have special forms to convey the idea that the person talked about is of lower status than the speaker (these are forms that Keating 1998 calls humiliative). Although honorifics have long been the focus of linguistic analysis, the more recent studies by linguistic anthropologists stress the dynamic use of honorific morphology and lexicon, the ways in which these forms are used to construct, change, or even challenge the on-going definition of the situation and the identities of the participants. These, more recent studies of honorifics have been based on the assumption that

context and talk are now argued to stand in a mutually reflexive relationship to each other, with talk, and the interpretive work it

generates, shaping context as much as context shapes talk. (Goodwin & Duranti 1992: 31)

This perspective currently guides the study of the ways in which participants in social events address each other and talk about particular people and topics. This line of research does not easily lend itself to quantifiable results or controlled experiments, but it uncovers the specific ways in which linguistic practices define social identities and social relations, which are the building block of social structure and social order. Ochs (1996), for example, argued that to understand the construction of social identities, we need to pay close attention to a number of situational dimensions that are often defined by language. These dimensions are: social acts (which draws on Searle's [1969] notion of speech act), activities (a sequence of two or more acts), and affective and epistemic stances. Affective stance is "a mood, attitude, feeling, and disposition, as well as degrees of emotional intensity vis-à-vis some focus of concern" (Ochs 1996: 410) and epistemic stance is the type of knowledge one displays vis-à-vis some focus of concern, for example, certainty or doubt, direct or indirect knowledge of an event.

Affective stance can be conveyed through the use of specific words or expressions and by a wide range of prosodic and paralinguistic features. For example, the use of curse words may convey an angry disposition toward something or someone just like the use of respectful words may convey a stance of deference. The use of loudness, emphatic stress, and lengthening of sounds may convey an affective stance of strong concern or intensity (Labov 1984). These stances are routinely used to build particular social acts (offending, praising, complaining), which, in turn, build particular social identities (tough guy vs. weak person, superior vs. subordinate, child vs.

parent, male vs. female). As Ochs wrote in her comparison of how gender roles are constructed in the U.S. and in Samoa, “[t]he roles and status of men and women are partly realized through the distribution of recontextualizing and precontextualizing acts, activities, stances, and topics.” (Ochs 1992: 346)

5. METHODS

An adequate discussion of the methods used by linguistic anthropologists would require a separate and lengthy treatment (I dedicated two chapters to it in Duranti 1997). But I do need to make a few general points about methodology. The first is that, like sociocultural anthropologists, linguistic anthropologists typically go to live in the communities they study and participate in the range of social encounters that constitute the social life of those communities. This is necessary in order to get an understanding of language as a resource for social interaction and for getting insights into the cultural meaning of what is being done with words. In the last few decades, there has been a considerable improvement in the tools used in documenting social encounters and increasingly higher standards for descriptive adequacy. At the same time, we have become more aware of the social and ethical concerns raised by the intrusion that our recording devices impose on people’s privacy (Duranti 1997: ch. 5). Whenever we study humans, the relationship between the researchers and their subjects is as delicate and as important as any other human relationship and as such requires care, mutual respect, and honesty. If the goal of our study is a better understanding of the role played by language in the human condition, we must be guided in our efforts by the desire to improve our communication across social and cultural boundaries. This applies to our fieldwork as well.

The fieldworker's participation in the social life of the community must be recorded as systematically as possible. This is done by writing fieldnotes and by transcribing recordings of social encounters, activities, and events. Fieldnotes are extremely important because they provide researchers a chance to both document important information (which is soon forgotten if not written down) and reflect on what one has just experienced. The reflection part is crucial for assessing our work while in the midst of it and for outlining future research questions and lines of inquiry. Transcription is equally important because it allows researchers to fix on paper (or on a computer screen) salient aspects of interactions that can then be interpreted, translated, collected, and compared. Transcription is thus a particular type of what Ricoeur (1981) called inscription. Any kind of inscription, and transcription is no exception, is an abstraction and as such it is not only a methodological but also a theoretical move (Ochs 1979). In transcribing interaction, linguistic anthropologists must rely on native speakers who have the necessary cultural background to understand the interaction being analyzed and the speech varieties used in it. There are many different ways of transcribing speech and nonverbal communication and I encourage students to become familiar with more than one way and then choose the one that better fits their research goals and needs (Duranti 1997: ch. 5). I tend to favor a modified form of the conventions originally introduced by Gail Jefferson for conversation analysis (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson 1974), in which talk is presented organized as a series of turns. Whenever possible, I try to match individual turns with individual utterances. This makes linguistic analysis (and searches throughout the corpus) easier. I also try to keep track of non-verbal communication. I never consider a transcript final. Transcripts need to be redone according to our research goals and our potential audience. For

example, a transcript that utilizes phonetic symbols is appropriate for linguists but would be too hard to decipher for anyone else. Similarly, a transcript that tries to cover all the information available to the participants at the time of speaking would be too cumbersome and equally hard to interpret.

Transcripts constitute a first analysis of the data we collect. They force us to make important decisions about what is salient in an interaction and at the same time, while being produced or once completed, they reveal phenomena we might not have been aware of before engaging in transcription.

The excerpt in (1) is taken from a transcript of an interaction recorded in a Samoan village in 1988. The family is about to have dinner. The father and the mother are sitting in the house, while the three children are getting the food from the cook house. This segment offers us an opportunity to reflect on how transcription can help us identify features of the ongoing activity. In this case, given that the language is Samoan, there is the added challenge of providing a translation for the readers. I have done so by inserting a word-by-word interlinear gloss and a "free translation" that tries to capture the pragmatic force of what is being said without going too far from the grammatical framing of the Samoan utterances. The word-by-word gloss forces the linguist to formulate hypotheses about parts of speech and either presupposes grammatical description or becomes a first step toward grammatical description⁹.

⁹ Abbreviations in interlinear glosses: ART = article, DX = postverbal deictic particle, EMP = emphatic particle, EXCL= exclusive, INC= inclusive, pl = plural morphology, PRES= present tense, PRO = pronoun, PST = past tense, VOC = vocative particle. Talk between single parentheses are best guesses of hard to hear utterances. Double parentheses mark contextual information. Double obliques (//) indicate point of overlap by next speaker. The colon (:) indicates lengthening of sound.

(1) (Family dinner # 2, August 1988) (After the church bell has rung, the father summons the children to perform the evening service, consisting of prayers and the singing of a hymn)

400 Father; sê ômai `i e fai muamua le loku
 VOC come(pl) here to say/do first ART service
 "c'mon (you all) come here to first do the service"

401 ku`u ia gâ mea.
 leave EMP those thing
 "leave those things."

402 Mother; ((to Father)) (se`i gofo mai le kama.)
 let sit DX Art boy
 "wait for the boy to sit down."

403 usu se pese e iloa.
 sing ART song PRES know
 "sing a hymn that is known (by everyone)."

404 (1.0)

405 Mother; Sefo (gofo // i luga)
 "Sefo (sit // up)"

406 Father; tâtou sâuni le fa`afetai i le Atua i lenei itulâ afiafi.
 we-INC prepare ART thank to ART Lord in this part afternoon
 "let us prepare the thanksgiving to the Lord on this part of the afternoon."

407 ((Father starts singing)) fa`afeta:i
 ((singing)) "tha::nks"

408 All; ((others join in)) i le A:tu::a
 to ART Lord
 "to the: Lo:rd"

408 lê na tâ::tou tupu a:i ...

who PST we-INCL generate PRO

“who created u::s all. ...”

Despite the considerable amount of information that is available on the video tape and is not represented here (like, for example, the position and posture of each participant -- they are sitting crosslegged on mats on the floor in a traditional Samoan house, with wooden posts and no walls), there are many aspects of the ongoing interaction that the transcript does make available for analysis. But such analysis relies heavily on background knowledge of Samoan language and cultural practices. For example, someone who knows Samoan will immediately realized that the way people speak changes in line 406. This change is signalled by two phonological segments (/t/ and /n/) that appear in line 406 but were absent in the first few turns. By integrating this information with the knowledge of the type of activity that is initiated at the same point (the evening “service”), we can hypothesize that the linguistic shift is an index of an activity shift: the participants are moving from conversation (among intimates) to prayer. An ethnographic study of the social life in any Samoan village would reveal that when people pray, they do so in a phonological variety called “good speech” (tautala lelei) (Duranti & Ochs 1986). In this variety there is an opposition between /t/ and /k/ and between /n/ and /ng/ (written “g” in Samoan orthography) which is neutralized during most other interactions, when the variety called “bad speech” (tautala leaga) is used. In lines 400-405, it is “bad speech” that is spoken by the mother and the father, as demonstrated for example by the word /loku/ “(religious) service” (with a /k/) instead of /lotu/ (with a /t/). The father’s announcement on line 406 (“let us prepare the thanksgiving to the

Lord on this part of the afternoon.”) is thus simultaneously the beginning of a joint activity -- the family “service” as mentioned in line 400) -- and an invitation to engage in a joint performance. As the hymn begins, participants are no longer being solely judged for their knowledge of what to say to whom, but also for the way in which they can deliver the lines of the song. These few lines of transcripts are full of interesting information about how language mediates cultural conventions and expectations. For example, in lines 402 and 405 we learn about the mother’s concern for the children’s proper posture during the evening service. In line 403, we learn about her concern for everyone’s ability to participate in the singing (she asks her husband to select a hymn that would be familiar to everyone). This might be a concession made to the presence of the researchers, that none of the family members appear incompetent on camera. At the same time, it reveals that: (i) there is a repertoire of hymns for any given service and that people are mindful of different degrees of competence in the performance of such hymns -- talking (or singing) to God is thus defined not as a private act but as a public one; (ii) the mother (rather than the father) is in charge of controlling the behavior of the children -- is this one of the ways in which the social identity of “mother” is constructed in this society? Obviously, we would need more recordings, more transcripts, more examples to answer this question or any other question generated by this brief excerpt. But this is a beginning.

6. CONCLUSIONS

In this brief review of the field of linguistic anthropology, I have tried to outline the concerns that gave rise to the study of language within the field of

anthropology. I also connected the issues that guided the discipline in its inception to those that continue to drive its practitioners today. I have started from the concern with the relation between language and mind and continued with the relation between language and cultural practices. I have pointed out that compared to other students of language, linguistic anthropologists study linguistic forms as constitutive of culture. This means that linguistic structures acquire meaning from the types of social interactions in which they are used and at the same time they help support those social interactions through the construction and testing of existing worldviews, social roles, and institutions. Meanings are inscribed in recurrent social actions where participants match their personal history with the history invoked by the actions (words included) of others. There is no easy one-on-one match between words and their meanings but there are social forces at work that impose or favor one form-content pair over another. Hence, the researchers' goal is to account for the ways in which language is subdued by the context or, vice versa, the context is shaped, challenged or changed by language. In this endeavor, both participant observation and transcription are essential tools. We must learn to connect the use of language with the activities that language mediates. It is from this connection that we gain an understanding of what it means to study language as an instrument of culture.

Exercises

1. Participant Observation: Novice vs. expert. Follow these instructions:
 - i. Pair up with another student.

- ii. Find an activity (a safe one, nothing daring or dangerous) that is familiar to one of you but not to the other.
- iii. Attend that event together.
- iv. Do not talk to each other about your experience after the activity is over.
- v. Each of you should write an account that captures the experience of going to the place where the activity took place -- for one of you it will be the experience of entering the community for the first time, for the other it will be the experience of "returning" to it (you can look at famous ethnographies for inspiration about how to tell the story of "entering the field"). This account will constitute your "fieldnotes."
- vi. Make a copy of your fieldnotes for your partner.
- vii. Compare your fieldnotes with those written by your partner and write an essay concentrating on the following points/dimensions:
 - a) What is emphasized and left out of each description of the activity?
 - b) To what extent can you say that what you two experienced is similar?
 - c) What did you learn about participant-observation from this exercise?

2. Recording. Repeat the same experience as defined in exercise no. 1, but this time bring a tape recorder (make sure to ask permission to the participants and follow whatever protocol is required by your university for such projects). Listen to the recorded tape and use the information you find useful in it to write up your account of your experience. Afterwards, answer the following questions:

- i. How has the tape recorded affected (if at all) your participation (e.g. your interaction with the participants, their interaction with one another, your awareness of what was going on)?

ii. How have you utilized the recorded tape affected your ability to provide a written account?

iii. How is your account for exercise no. 1 different from your account for exercise no. 2?

3. Transcription. Repeat the same experience as defined in exercise no. 2 but this time transcribe a portion of the recorded interaction. Before starting to transcribe, answer the following questions:

i. How is the quality of the recording and what factors seem responsible for it?

ii. Does the quality of the recording change at different points? How can you account for it?

iii. What portion of the tape will you be transcribing and why?

iv. Which conventions will you use in transcribing and why?

v. What do you expect to get out of the transcription?

After finishing the transcription, answer the following questions:

vi. What was the most difficult thing in transcribing?

vii. Now that you have tried to transcribe the interaction recorded in the tape, is there something you would do differently in participating, observing, and recording the event?

viii. What did you learn from transcribing?

3b. Transcription # 2. Repeat exercises 2 and 3 but this time do it with a video camera. Compare the experience of recording and transcribing with a tape recorder to the experience of recording and transcribing with a video camera.

4. Analysis of an activity. Provide an analysis of the activity you participated in and recorded, focusing on one of the following aspects:

- i. The definition of the activity. Find ways in which the participants defined their activity and find ways in which you could define the activity on the basis of your observation and transcription. You might want to concentrate on certain portions of the activity, for example, the beginning and/or the end. You could also describe the event contrastively, that is, comparing it with other similar or different events in the same community. (Notice that here you will have the problem of gathering information on events you have not observed yet. You have two options: (a) rely on existing literature, (b) expand your corpus by observing other events).
- ii. Describe the linguistic competence necessary to participate in the activity you observed. Are there differences among the participants in terms of their competence? How are the differences manifested?
- iii. Describe the activity as a performance. What aspects of the activity fall within the realm of "performance"? How is performance a dimension that differentiates among participants?

5. Establish a collection, I.

Look at the transcript you have produced and identify some recurrent phenomenon, e.g. a type of genre, activity, speech act, linguistic construction, gesture. Make a list of all the occurrences (once you have made the list, you might find that you need to edit the original transcript to be more consistent).

Answer the following questions:

- i. What kind of phenomenon have you identified and why?
- ii. Who produces it the most? Who produces it the least?
- iii. Is the phenomenon under examination part of a more general class of phenomena? Which ones?

- iv. Is there literature on the phenomenon you've identified? What have other researchers said about it? Do your observations support what found in the literature or did you uncover some new ground?
- v. How does the phenomenon relate to the broader context in which it occurs? How can you establish such relationships?
- vi. What did you learn about the activity and its participants by focusing on this particular phenomenon?

6. Establish a collection, II.

Identify a phenomenon you are interested in (e.g. an activity like greeting, a speech act like apologizing, a genre like a sermon or a lecture, a type of address term, a type of grammatical construction, a type of code switching). What would be the best way to gather data that would allow you establish a substantial collection of this type of phenomenon? Collect the data.

- 7. Use the data collected for exercise 6 to write a proposal for further research.

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