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CULTURAL UNIVERSALS IN THE ACQUISITION OF LANGUAGE

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I. INTRODUCTION

The ideas I am about to put forward are highly speculative in nature. From the point of view of many ethnographers, the discussion borders on the heretical, for what I am considering is the issue of cultural universals in the use of language and their implications for the acquisition of language. Cultural universals? Isn't that an oxymoron? We can consider culture as a set of socially recognized and organized practices and theories for acting, feeling and knowing along with their material and institutional products, associated with membership in a social group. Isn't culture then local, particular, unique? Yes. It is. But culture is also a universal property of the human condition and in this sense, we might expect that aspects of culture, including certain uses of language, will define membership not only in a local group but in the human species as well.

Culture is both particular and universal and any one practice or theory can be examined from either perspective. What I propose to do here is to outline a model for considering universal and particular ways in which language structures culture. While grounded in research in pragmatics and language socialization, the model is speculative and should be taken not as a state of the art report of research but rather as an agenda for future research.

In this discussion, I will necessarily have to limit the

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analysis of the relation of language to culture. My focus of attention will be on how language relates to the following four dimensions of culture: 1. epistemic and affective stances, 2) social acts, 3) social activities and 4) social identities. These dimensions are preliminarily defined in the following manner:

1. Stance: a socially recognized disposition

    1.a. epistemic stance: a socially recognized way of knowing a proposition, such as direct (experiential) and indirect (e.g. second hand) knowledge, degrees of certainty and specificity.

    1.b. affective stance: a socially recognized feeling, attitude, mood or degree of emotional intensity.

2. Social act: a socially recognized performance or doing of an action

3. Social activity: a sequence of two or more social acts that are socially recognized as a unit

4. Social identity: a socially recognized status or relationship (e.g. expert, speaker, strangers)

The model that I propose assumes that language plays an important role in defining each of these cultural dimensions. Following the work of John Gumperz (1982a), the model assumes that communities develop linguistic conventions for marking these dimensions and that when interlocutors interact with one another, they use these conventions to signal one or another stance, act, activity, and identity. These conventions are sometimes referred

to as 'indexes' (Lyons 1977) in that they signal or imply that some stance, act, activity or identity is present or in play in the communicative context. For example, the use of a tag question (as in 'It's raining, isn't it?') may index that the social act we call a request for confirmation is in play (Ochs 1988). In some communities, the use of respect vocabularies may index a deferential stance towards a referent or addressee.

Every child who acquires language acquires a tacit knowledge of the indexical scope of particular linguistic structures. Such knowledge is critical to assigning meaning to linguistic constructions (hence indexical competence is part of linguistic competence) and to functioning as a member of a particular social group (hence indexical competence is part of cultural competence). I am interested in the nature of indexicality, here in particular, in the extent to which children in different social groups may be acquiring and relying upon similar structures to index cultural information.

II. THREE HYPOTHESES

The core of the proposed model consists of three hypotheses increasing in specificity from the first to the last. The hypotheses suggest how we might talk about language and culture universals and particulars. That is, the model suggests a set of generalizations to be examined and refined through future ethnographically astute studies of speaking and thinking and feeling among children and adults across the world's societies. As in other research on language, these hypotheses propose non-

absolutive universals, that is, widespread practices and tendencies rather than language use patterns found in all societies (Comrie 1981).

A. HYPOTHESIS ONE : THERE ARE CULTURALLY UNIVERSAL TENDENCIES IN THE LINGUISTIC MARKING OF STANCE, SOCIAL ACTS, SOCIAL ACTIVITIES AND SOCIAL IDENTITIES.

This first hypothesis makes a simple claim that if we look at stance, acts, activities and identities, we will find that certain linguistic structures are used across a wide number of communities to index certain of the same stance, act, activity and identity meanings. Let us consider this claim for each of these four cultural domains.

Stance:If we examine how language indexes stance, we can find candidate universals in the indexing of both epistemic and affective stance. In the domain of epistemic stance, for example, indirect knowledge is widely indexed through reported speech predicates (e.g.'says' 'reports'); uncertain knowledge is indexed in many societies through modals (e.g. 'can','could', 'may', 'might'), rising intonation (e.g. 'You're going out?'), and/or interrogative structures ('Where are you going?'). As eloquently summarized by Levinson (1983), certain knowledge is widely indexed through factive predicates (e.g.'know', 'realize', 'be aware of'), determiners (e.g.'the'), cleft constructions (e.g. 'It wasn't a book that I read', 'What I read wasn't a book'), and iteratives (e.g. 'He left again' 'He didn't leave anymore') among other structures.

In the domain of affective stance, in many communities, increased affective intensity is indexed by switching to a form not typically used in referring or addressing a person (Ochs & Schieffelin 1989), e.g. using plural marking for a single referent, using a demonstrative pronoun in place of a personal pronoun (in Italian 'quello' instead of 'lui'). Intensity is also indexed through vowel lengthening ('It was stu::pendous'), through modulating loudness up or down (as in shouting or whispering) and modulating speed of delivery. As noted in Brown and Levinson in their study of politeness universals (1987), positive affect is widely indexed through in-group address forms (e.g. 'mate' 'brother') and switching to a local dialect or language. Also widespread is the indexing of positive affect through diminutive forms (e.g. in Italian 'uccell-ino' means '(sweet) little bird',when contrasted with 'uccell-accio' 'nasty big bird' in Pasolini's reknowned film Uccellaci e Uccellini (translated into English as The Hawks and Sparrows.

Social act: In the domain of social acts, requests for information are indexed through interrogative pronouns and syntax and through rising intonation in many communities; and requests for confirmation through tag questions ('We're going, aren't we?') or tag particles such as 'huh' in English, 'a' in Samoan , and 'ne' in Japanese. Interrogative structures are also widely used to index requests for goods and services (e.g. 'Could you give me a ride home?") as are predicates with verbs of need ("I need a ride home") and desire ("I want a ride home") (Gordon & Lakoff 1971).

In many societies, address terms and imperatives index directives such as summons (e.g. 'Lady!) and orders (e.g.'Turn left!'). Further, probably all societies have available affirmative and negative forms to index the acts of agreement and disagreement.

Social activity: In the domain of social activities, we can isolate two levels of candidate universals in the linguistic structuring of social activities. On one level, we may find

THERE ARE UNIVERSAL TENDENCIES IN THE KINDS OF SPEECH ACTS OR STANCES THAT CONSTITUTE A PARTICULAR TYPE OF SOCIAL ACTIVITY

This generalization proposes that across a wide range of societies certain activities are constituted by similar social acts or stances. That is, certain activities may entail certain social acts or certain stances. Candidate universals in this sense include disputes (which may include at least one disagreement and/or negative affect), clarification (which may include at least either a request to restate a proposition or a statement of noncomprehension, or a request to confirm a guess plus uncertain stance) and planning (which may include at least a method for responding to some identified problem.) This universal concerns only act and stance to activity relations and speaks to linguistic structuring only on this level of discourse.

A second level of universality takes the following form: We will find

THERE ARE UNIVERSALS IN THE GRAMMATICAL, LEXICAL AND PHONOLOGICAL INDEXING OF SOCIAL ACTIVITIES TO THE EXTENT THAT 1) ACTIVITIES ARE COMPOSED OF SIMILAR SOCIAL ACTS AND STANCES AND 2) THESE SOCIAL ACTS AND STANCES ARE INDEXED THROUGH THE SAME GRAMMATICAL, LEXICAL AND PHONOLOGICAL FORMS.

This generalization rests on the notion of associative or indirect indexicality (Ochs 1988), which claims that grammatical, lexical and phonological forms may index a range of cultural meanings that are associated with one another. In this case, linguistic forms may index not only stance or not only social action but the set of social activities associated with the display of some stance or social act. In other words, a social activity that is constituted through some stance or some social act may be indexed through the same linguistic forms that index that stance or social act. Hence an activity such as a funeral may be indexed through the same linguistic forms that index the affect of grief if funerals are culturally constituted through or associated with the display of grief. Members of a society rely on these linguistic forms to recognize not only what stance is being displayed but what activity is taking place as well.

In the current discussion, we are concerned with universals in the grammatical, lexical and phonological indexing of social activity. I have proposed that there are universals to the extent that there are universals in the stance and act constitution of specific activities and that there are universal patterns in the linguistic marking of those constitutive stances and acts. Let us consider a candidate universal. We have noted that in many societies, dispute activities entail acts of disagreement and a stance of negative affect. In addition, disagreements and negative affect are indexed through similar linguistic forms across societies (e.g negative particles, modulation of volume or pace of

speech). To the extent these forms do index disagreement and negative affect across societies and to the extent that disagreements and negative affect constitute the activity of disputes across societies, we expect to find universals in the grammatical, lexical and phonological indexing of disputes.

Social identity: As in the domain of social activities, social identities are in part constituted through social acts and stances. I propose that, like social activities,

THERE ARE UNIVERSAL TENDENCIES IN THE KINDS OF SOCIAL ACTS OR STANCES THAT CONSTITUTE A PARTICULAR TYPE OF SOCIAL IDENTITY.

For example, it is probably a universal that higher ranking persons receive from lower ranking persons a stance of deference. Higher rank is also widely indexed through rights to directive acts such as orders and summons.

Again as in the domain of social activities, we expect to find universals in the grammatical, lexical, and prosodic indexing of social identities to the extent that the stances and social acts that universally constitute particular identities are themselves indexed through similar grammatical, lexical or phonological forms:

THERE ARE UNIVERSALS IN THE GRAMMATICAL, LEXICAL AND PHONOLOGICAL INDEXING OF SOCIAL IDENTITIES TO THE EXTENT THAT 1) IDENTITIES ARE COMPOSED OF SIMILAR SOCIAL ACTS AND STANCES AND 2) THESE SOCIAL ACTS AND STANCES ARE INDEXED THROUGH THE SAME GRAMMATICAL, LEXICAL AND PHONOLOGICAL FORMS.

I suggest that this condition holds for the indexing of higher rank. We have noted that higher rank entails receiving deference from others in many societies in the world. As noted by Brown and Levinson (1987), it is also the case that deference is indexed in

similar ways across societies, for example, through respect vocabularies (e.g. use of 'dining' 'residence' 'care to' in English) or honorific marking in many societies, through indirect forms of speech acts, and through hedges (e.g. 'sort of' 'kind of' 'rather''in a sense') Another potential language and culture universal is the marking of expert status. In numerous social groups, expert status may be indexed linguistically through use of a specialized lexicon, through highly detailed descriptions and linguistic markers of certainty in speaking to novices.

These suggested universal tendencies in the indexing of stance, social acts, social activities and social identities mean that members of cultures the world over may be socializing their children through language in similar ways. Children may well be acquiring common linguistic strategies for structuring social life regardless of the society in which they seek membership. These similarities are what makes it possible for people from one society to communicate at all with other societies. For better or for worse, these proposed commonalities may allow for interactional co-ordination across social boundaries. Although we know that miscommunication is rampant in such interactions, it is nonetheless the case that some aspects of stance, social action, social activity and social identity are grasped, that some cultural meanings travel across the borders of particular communities. Ethnographers, immigrants, travelers all - rely upon these common indexical threads as they strive to make sense out of and participate in social life. Culture shock and crosstalk are

outcomes of their inability to go beyond these shared meanings to understand other, local meanings indexed by particular linguistic structures.

B. HYPOTHESIS TWO: LANGUAGE AND CULTURE UNIVERSALS LIE PRIMARILY IN THE INDEXING OF STANCE AND SOCIAL ACTS. THE LINGUISTIC MARKING OF STANCE AND SOCIAL ACTS IS MORE WIDESPREAD AND MORE CONVENTIONALIZED ACROSS SOCIAL GROUPS THAN THE MARKING OF OTHER DOMAINS.

This hypothesis takes a stronger stand and proposes that it is easier to find candidate language and culture universals in the indexing of stance and social acts than in the indexing of social activities and social identities. A partial reason for why we might find more examples of non-absolutive universals here is that these domains are richly indexed in the grammar, lexicon, and phonology of all languages, as two decades of research on pragmatics attest.

But we still are faced with the question of why social groups develop such rich indexical systems for marking stance and social action in the first place. I suggest that stance and social action are privileged in part because they are the basic building blocks of cultural entities such as social identities and social activities. Stance and social action help to define a particular status, a particular relationship, a particular activity. If you want to understand who you are, who the people around you are, what their relationship is to one another and to you, and what kind of activity you are participating in, then you need to recognize the stances and social acts being displayed. Stance and social action

markings thus provide valuable keys to understanding what is happenning at any one moment in time. And this understanding in turn is critical to species survival in the long run and to making the appropriate next move in the short run. As Gregory Bateson notes in <u>Steps to an Ecology of Mind</u> (1972) and in <u>Mind and Nature (1979)</u>, stance and social action are richly and conventionally indexed not only for humans but in the behavior of other animals as well. Knowledge and recognition of stance and action framing conventions are crucial to evaluating the seriousness of the situation at hand. Bateson's famous example is 'The playful nip is not the bite', meaning that an animal's survival may rest on the ability to distinguish between the indexes of play and serious acts. Continuity of social life, indeed communication of the most fundamental sort, thus depends on members' recognition of stance and social act indexes. In many ways, knowledge of the structures that index types of stance and social action is what allows humans and other species to co-ordinate their behaviors, to co-operate or otherwise engage in what Vygotsky (1978) calls 'joint activity'. While not many of these indexes are shared across species, within the human species certain stance and action indexes do cut across social boundaries and to the extent that this is the case, such universal markings further promote human continuity and human co-operation.

C. <u>HYPOTHESIS THREE</u>: (HYPOTHESIS TWO ASSUMED +) LANGUAGE AND CULTURE PARTICULARS LIE PRIMARILY IN HOW STANCE AND SOCIAL ACTS RELATE TO SOCIAL ACTIVITIES AND SOCIAL IDENTITIES ON THE OTHER.

This proposal suggests another reason why there may be more language and culture universals on the level of stance and social act marking than on the level of social activity and social identity marking. It suggests that while there are certain universal patterns in the stance and act make up of activities and identities, there are many cultural differences. Among other considerations, cultural differences concern

1) the range of stances and social acts appropriate to particular activities and particular social identities,

2) the frequency of stance and act displays appropriate to a particular activity and social identity.

Let us consider first the range of stances and social acts appropriate to activities and identities. Consider, for example, the social identity of chief in traditional communities in Western Samoa. While chief may entail certain of the same stances and social acts of high status persons across societies, (e.g. receiving deference, and rights to directive social acts), there will be other stances and social acts that index Samoan chiefs uniquely, particularly. For example, in decision-making activities, chiefs have the right and are expected to express opinions to lower status persons whereas lower status persons are expected to make suggestions when invited to do so (Duranti 1981, in press). For members of the Samoan community, then, chief entails the right to give opinions. Another way of putting this is to say that in this community, the social act of giving an opinion indexes the status

of chief. However, the same social act does not necessarily translate as an index of chief (or necessarily of high status more generally) in other societies. This indexical meaning is a culture-particular meaning that Samoan children must acquire but not, for example, children growing up in mainstream middle class households. in the United States.

Turning to frequency of stance and act displays, Bambi Schieffelin and I have suggested (Schieffelin & Ochs 1988) that societies differ in how often a particular stance or social act is appropriately displayed by a particular social identity in the course of a particular activity. For example, while the social activity of prompting a child is probably universal, societies differ in the typical number of individual prompts that occur within this activity. In Melanesian societies like the Kwara'ae (Solomon Islands) and the Kaluli (Papua New Guinea), for example, prompting activities typically involve far more prompting acts than in other societies (Watson-Gegeo & Gegeo 1986, Schieffelin 1979, in press). When transcribed, these activities often take up several pages of transcript, whereas prompts recorded in other communities are of far shorter duration.

Another example of cultural differences in frequency of social acts concerns the activity of clarifying an unintelligible utterance. As noted earlier, clarifying universally entails very similar alternative social acts. Probably universally clarification is carried out either by indicating one has not understood or by requesting a reformulation or restatement of all or part of the

unintelligible utterance or by requesting a confirmation or disconfirmation of a verbalized guess at what the utterance might be. However, cultural particulars lie in the frequency with which these alternative acts are displayed in the activity of clarifying. In traditional Samoan communities, for example, requests to confirm or disconfirm a verbalized guess are quite rare, whereas for Euro-American societies, such requests are commonplace (Ochs 1988).

These cross-cultural differences in range and frequency of stances and social acts appropriate to particular social activities and social identities are vital to both acquirers and researchers in that they are windows to local theories of thinking, feeling and acting, to values, and to larger political and economonic institutions. For example, the range of stances and social acts associated with male and female speakers provides valuable information concerning the politics of gender. The frequency of prompting acts in a society provides valuable information concerning local theories of instruction. The high or low frequency of verbally guessing at an unintelligible utterance implies a world view as to how clarification, indeed communication as a whole, is to be accomplished.

As the work of John Gumperz and his collegues eloquently displays (Gumperz 1982a, 1982b), it is this area of knowledge - knowledge of the stance and act entailments of activities and identities - that seems so elusive to those acquiring second cultures and second languages in adult life. The major problem if cross-cultural communication is not that interlocutors do not

understand one another at all. I would venture to say that interlocutors understand quite a lot of the stance and social act meanings indexed in one another's utterances. Communicative expectations break down largely because from the perspective of one or the other interlocutor, the stance and act display was not expected or appropriate or went on too long for the particular activity underway or the particular social status or social relationship assumed to be in play. The problem is that some cultural understanding is shared but not all. When this occurs, each interlocutor is jarred and may consider the other to be rude or incompetent.

III. ACQUIRING LANGUAGE-AND-CULTURAL COMPETENCE

Whether we are speaking of first or second language acquisition, and whether we are speaking of language and culture universals or particulars, language-and-cultural competence rests on the ability to use language constitutively. Acquirers must learn to use and recognize linguistic indexes of stances and social acts and they must learn how stances and social acts constitute social activities and social identities and other facets of what some scholars call 'culture' and others call 'context'. Only through knowledge of how language relates to each of these domains can an acquirer recognize the indexical scope of language and participate as a member of society.

In terms of first and second language acquisition there is much to be done. An urgent agenda is to sort out more precisely how

acquirers do develop competence in indexing and linguistically constituting social life. What do acquirers at different points in time know about the indexing of stance, social action, social activities and social identities? Where do the bulk of their errors fall? In the indexing of stance and social action? Or in the co-ordination between stance and social action on the one hand and activity and identity on the other?

The notion of culture has become quite fashionable in psychology in these post-modern times. It has surfaced in the enormous popularity of Vygotsky, Luria, Leontyev and other proponents of socio-historical psychology, in the renewal of cultural psychology as represented by the recent volume of that name edited by Stigler, Shweder and Herdt (1990), in the rediscovery of Gibson's ecological theory of visual perception (Gipson 1979), in the rise of context-centered approaches such as parallel-distributed processing (Rumelhart et al 1986), in the impact of socialization research on the field of human development, (Cicourel 1973, Goodnow 1990), in a general awareness that thinking and feeling are situated in a culturally constituted life space, and in the willingness of major funding bodies such as the National Institute of Health and the Social Science Research Council to establish working groups and otherwise nurture the pursuit of a culturally attuned psychology.

We may safely say that culture is 'in'. At the same time the future of culture as an object of study within psychology is somewhat clouded by the way it has been considered. Culture tends

to be reified and glorified as terribly important but obscure and hard to get a handle on. You can't see it; you can't count it; where is it? This almost religious view of culture is highly distancing. Culture, like God, becomes almost unknowable. Such a perspective discourages the learning and incorporation of specific ethnographic skills within psychology. And yet such skills are critical to describing specific situations and meanings and accounting for processing and production strategies of adults and children alike. For all the many mentions of context, situatedness, and culture, few culturally keen psychological studies attend with rigor to norms, preferences, and expectations surrounding the expression of stance, the performance of social acts, and their changing and unchanging relation to the constitution of social, economic and political identities and activities. Without this knowledge, we are doomed to view culture only as an environment (as captured in the notion of 'situatedness' as in 'situated knowledge') or only as a constraint on mental activity (as captured in the notion of culture as an independent variable). We will never make progress in understanding the kinds of psychological skills that are demanded of particular social activities or particular social roles in activities; or the ways in which cultural knowledge is acquired. We will not get a whit closer to substantiating or furthering in any interesting way the notion put forward originally by Vygotsky and rearticulated by Cole (Cole 1985) that culture and cognition create each other in the course of social interaction. An adequate theory of cultural psychology

demands adequacy at the level of culture as well as psychology, as Sapir noted years ago. It is not enough to an aficionado of culture, an enthusiast of culture. It is time, indeed it is past time, for the cultural psychologist to become a serious student of culture.

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