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Experiencing language

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What is This?

Experiencing language

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Abstract
This essay argues that psycho-cultural anthropologists addressing the relation of language to experience tend to focus on the *symbolic* property of language. This focus has led to a celebration of words as capturing public cultural meanings, but it has also generated disparagement of language as arbitrary, controlling and remote from a person's 'authentic' thoughts and feelings. A part-modernist, part-Platonic transcendental sentiment lingers that the language-world divide is irretrievably expansive. This essay suggests that the incompleteness of language begs further consideration. Language's inadequacy on the symbolic level is partly compensated by the additional capacity of language to be *indexical*, i.e. to bring into consciousness a realm of contextually relevant meanings, including the situated self. The essay promotes a phenomenological view of language in which ordinary enactments of language, i.e. utterances, are themselves *modes of experiencing the world*. In this perspective, the distinction between experience-near and experience-distant as conceptualized in anthropological scholarship misses the fundamental point that language, once in motion, and experience are conjoined.

A keystone in human evolution is the emergence of a type of sign referred to as the *symbol* (Deacon 1997; Peirce 1931–58). The symbol is thought to differ from the icon in its arbitrary relation to the world it represents. The symbol exceeds the icon in cognitive complexity, in that it conventionally differentiates sign and object, requires membership in a community to interpret, and can be more easily manipulated and combined with other signs to create a complex system of representation such as language. In essence, the symbol is a representation that bears no resemblance to the represented. The English terms 'home' or 'doctor' or 'thrilling', for example, are not to be confused with the entities they stand for. It is precisely this ability to distinguish the symbol from the symbolized that is critical to children's

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cognitive development and key to their acquiring linguistic competence (Karmiloff-Smith 1979; Piaget 1966; Piaget and Inhelder 1969).

Along with its symbolic capacity, language also has the potentiality to be indexical, performative, and phenomenological (Austin 1962; Buhler 1990; Duranti 2009; Jackobson 1960; Levinson 1983; Peirce 1931–58, Sapir 1921; Silverstein 1996). Yet, it is the symbolic character of language – its arbitrariness and seeming separateness from concrete and abstract entities in the world – that has dominated scholarship across many disciplines, including anthropology. The attention has been two-edged: a celebration of linguistic symbols as capturing public cultural meanings and a disparagement of linguistic symbols as controlling, organizing, obfuscating, or irrelevant to thoughts and feelings (for comprehensive discussions cf. Abu-Lughod and Lutz 1990; Bloch 1991; Boellstorff and Lindquist 2004; Lutz and White 1986; Rosaldo 1979; Wikan 1990). The focus on language's fecundity of symbols has spawned challenges to its adequacy to capture authentic experience and its complicity in conventional self-representations that suit status quo power structures. A part-modernist, part-Platonic transcendental sentiment lingers that the language-world divide is irretrievably expansive, rendering certain thoughts and feelings as ineffable. In this perspective, the profundity of certain essences cannot be captured.

Since the inception of anthropology, these views and others have positioned language, especially language as used in everyday life, as a moral object in itself. A string of linguistic anthropologists have addressed the disciplinary status of language over the years, including Boas (1911, 1938), Sapir (1921), Gumperz (1992), Hymes (1972), Silverstein (1981, 1996), Lucy (1997), Bauman (1977a), Briggs (2002), Hanks (1990), Hill (1985), Duranti (1997) and Levinson (1983). I will not repeat these incisive discussions but rather focus on the single issue of language's role in filtering experience as a moral concern in psycho-cultural anthropology.

With respect to the realm of experience, Dewey's (1916: 247–8) depiction is useful: 'The nature of experience can be understood only by noting that it includes an active and a passive element peculiarly combined.. . . When we experience something we act upon it, we do something with it; then we suffer or undergo the consequences.' That is, experience involves creating a change in ourselves. James (1979 [1907]) similarly notes that experience is not given to us as a pre-formed package but something that we discover. In the Jamesian framework, language plays a decisive role in the formation of experience (1977 [1909]). Experience no sooner comes into consciousness than it becomes penetrated by linguistic forms. It is precisely such saturated entanglement of experience and language that has fueled anthropological discussion of the extent of language's grip on how people think, feel, and act in the world.

At this point a little professional autobiography is in order. Fresh out from training as a linguistic anthropologist under the tutelage of Dell Hymes, I spent the first 26 years of my academic life in linguistics and applied linguistics departments and then in 1999 moved into the Department of Anthropology at UCLA,

where there is a vibrant program in psycho-cultural-medical anthropology. Over the last decade the department has developed a thriving cross-subfield dialogue around matters of language forms and practices on the one hand and experience on the other, especially the configuring of emotions, selves, persons, intersubjectivity, and empathy. Faculty members have taught together, attended one another's interest groups, co-designed research projects, and co-mentored dissertations that bridge linguistic and psycho-cultural-medical anthropology.

Yet there remains a certain entrenchment and perhaps a certain snobbism on the part of both subfields that the other subfield does not tap into what really is going on in the life worlds of communities and the members who inhabit them. As a linguistic anthropologist, I hold a great longing for psychological anthropology to honor language, learn languages, and look deeply into the manifold ways in which the temporal unfolding of language in and across situations – not just words but phonology, morphology, syntax, and discourse – is implicated in moment-to-moment thinking, feeling, and being in the world.

Alternatively, psychological anthropologists hold out an equally tantalizing possibility that language *in situ*, while not irrelevant, is hopelessly inadequate in accessing experience, loss being a case in point. And much of the sub-field addresses the poignancy of language's shortcomings and ways to overcome this dilemma. Moreover, Pierre Bourdieu's negative view of interaction analysts as suffering from an 'occasionalist illusion' (Bourdieu 1990; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) spills over to taint linguistic anthropology and haunt the linguistic-psychological anthropology divide. As Bourdieu (1990: 291) notes:

> Contrary to all forms of the occasionalist illusion which inclines one to relate practices directly to properties inscribed in the situation, it has to be pointed out that the 'interpersonal' relations are only apparently person-to-person relations and that the truth of the interaction never lies entirely in the interaction.[1]

Within this occasionalist illusion, linguistic anthropologists as students of lived social encounters seem to overly dwell upon semiotic acts, interactions, genres, and registers that attune to social situations, while the psycho-cultural anthropologist yearns for a broader attunement to self and society, the play of emotions in social life, moral valences, the limits of understanding, or, for those who still hold to the notion, to ethos.

This petition is neither a 'love letter' nor a 'Dear John' letter to psycho-cultural anthropology but rather a petition to engage in a kind of 'couples therapy' session with linguistic anthropology to wrangle with perceived shortcomings and realize the potentialities of our intellectual relationship. This essay is quite one-sided, an opening gambit in a bid for a more substantive integration of our pursuits. As a first step, I present two perspectives on language and experience that prevail in psycho-cultural anthropology then invite a broadening of these perspectives to include indexical and phenomenological approaches to language *in situ*.

View I: The symbolic perspective

To the extent that language is culled as a relevant force in anthropological research on culture and human experience, it is predominantly considered as symbolic representation, *a focus that amplifies the separateness between language and experience or being-in-the-world.*

This separateness is nowhere more evident than discussions of 'experience-near' and 'experience-distant' language, a distinction originating in the framework of Austrian psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut (1977, 1984) and imported into cultural anthropology by the decidedly non-psychological anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1974) in his piece 'From the Native's Point of View'. Why begin with Geertz as a purported addressee in this dialogue? I perceive that Geertz's view of language as symbolic is the natural attitude in much of psychological anthropology and that there is a continued confusion surrounding experience-near and experience-distant language practices.

It is critically important to realize that Kohut used this distinction to emphasize *two modes of using language* in psychoanalysis – the experience-near being empathic and mirroring the client's point of view; the experience-distant being analytical and socio-emotionally more detached from the client – while Geertz used this distinction to emphasize *two kinds of symbolic representation*. For Kohut, successful psychoanalysis depends upon the quality of the therapeutic relationship. It initially requires experience-near communication, in which one palpably experiences another person's self-understandings or 'those former, split-off, and perhaps discarded fragments of one's own self' (Strozier 2001: 345). His encounters with narcissistic persons led him to realize the import of experience-near listening. Eventually, as cure draws closer, he communicates abstract interpretation, but, at this point in the therapeutic process, these concepts are *still* experience-near, in that they resonate with the client's self-explorations and the client can absorb them (Strozier 2001: 338). The goal for Kohut was to enlarge the client's self-understanding through first engaging in empathic experience-near mirroring, so that eventually the client can embrace experience-distant understandings of self. Alternatively, for Geertz a primary goal was the transcendent ethnographic enterprise of reconciling native, i.e. 'experience-near', concepts and anthropological, i.e. 'experience-distant', concepts in the face of hermeneutic obstacles to cross-cultural interpretation and understanding.

While Kohut prized experience-near communication for its empathic potency, Geertz (1974: 29) warned that 'confinement to experience-near *concepts* leaves an ethnographer awash in immediacies as well as entangled in vernacular'. Indeed, Geertz argued that *Einfühlung* (empathy) is not necessary for anthropological *Verstehen* (understanding) of the other. Only go as far as needed, he seems to say, 'to produce an interpretation of the way a people lives which is neither imprisoned within their mental horizons... nor systematically deaf to the distinctive tonalities of their existence' (1983: 29). In this sense, Geertz's experience-near

and experience-distant were simply two conceptual poles in a delicate translation process.[2]

The focus on language as symbolic in anthropology and other disciplines carries with it a preoccupation with ordinary language as an *inauthentic* representation of ideas, emotions, and other entities. This concern resonates with Rousseau's Romantic view of '"non-literary" relations of language to reality as conventional and as alienated as before' (Williams 1977: 24). An abiding concern with language and authenticity has consumed scholars and artists across the 20th century. James (1909: 276) declared pure experience 'no sooner comes than it tends to fill itself with emphases ... so that experience now flows as if shot through with adjectives and nouns and prepositions and conjunctions. Its purity is only a relative term, meaning the proportional amount of unverbalized sensation which it still embodies'. Similarly, in *Being and Time* (1962), Heidegger vilified ordinary talk (e.g. informal conversation) as 'inauthentic' and as 'idle talk' that gives rise to 'spurious identities'. Only later in his analysis of poetry (Heidegger 1971: xii) did he acknowledge that language 'bids to come the intimacy of world and things'. And Musil's 1930s masterpiece, *The Man without Qualities*, was populated by superficial characters who spoke in dead metaphors, bureaucratic formulas, and shallow cultural code words with a mechanical certainty that frustrated the central anti-hero, Ulrich, who, alternatively, craved to break through to his own true self. Breton (1972), Lacan (1999), Badiou (2005), Foucault (1972), Žižek (2000), and a host of other scholars also have portrayed ordinary discourse as robotic and morally impoverished (cf. Eagleton 2009 for discussion). Žižek (2008: 68), for example, has concluded that 'Reality in itself, in its stupid existence, is never intolerable. It is language, its symbolization, which makes it such.' In these frameworks, the solution to the mindless and imprisoning force of language is to violate language conventions in some way, for example, through theatrical or literary works that call attention to and use language in marked ways or through political critiques of entrenched discourse genres, psychoanalysis, or, as Foucault suggests, madness.

These laments go beyond everyday language to implicate a view of society *itself* as artificial, deceptive, and, hence, immoral. This perspective breaks with the more positive image of the relation between person and community that prevailed among Greek philosophers such as Aristotle. The roots of this more drastic view of public social life can be traced back to at least the late 16th century, when feudalism gave way to the possibility of upward social mobility through wealth and good manners (Trilling 1972). As exemplified in Diderot's 18th-century classic *Rameau's Nephew*, the insincere deployment of fawning etiquette to gain social class privileges was widely deplored in post-feudal France. Over the centuries everyday language has been at the heart of this disregard.

The focus on language as an inauthentic symbolic system also implicates a subjective and objective world independent of semiotic representations. Somewhere underneath the idle talk there is an essential reality to be unmasked. Or, if expressed, such entities are cheated by pallid representations. As noted by Rorty (1991), this view of the limits of language was emphasized in Wittgenstein's

Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus (1922), but was later refuted in *Philosophical Investigations* (1953). Rorty relates Wittgenstein's later pragmatic perspective to Heidegger's insight (1962, 1971) that, rather than being merely superficial marks and noises, language is an active force in attaining, moment-by-moment, contingently and fragilely, the primordial experience of being present in the world: 'As the existential condition of the disclosedness of Da-sein, discourse is constitutive of Da-sein' (Heidegger 1962: 151).

Along these same lines, Agamben (1993) has more recently argued that the separation of language and world is conceptually flawed. In Agamben's framework, far from being a sign of developmental immaturity or primitive thinking, all humans integrate linguistic symbols into how they understand entities denoted by those symbols. Agamben uses relation of the term 'shoe' to the concept 'shoe' as a case in point. He notes that although people generally do not confuse 'the acoustic or graphic form' of 'shoe' with the object shoe signified, the social fact that the object shoe is called 'shoe' constitutes a crucial 'non-predicative property that belongs to each of [the] class' of shoe. In other words, 'being-called-(shoe)' is part of our idea of shoe. Agamben is not forwarding a Whorfian argument here but rather making the more abstract point that language forms per se seep into the world of signification. From this perspective, any language form that is part of one's working repertoire is inherently experience-near and foundational to individual and community. Like Wittgenstein, Agamben echoes Heidegger's insistence that language is the gateway to experiencing the world. Heidegger (1971: 199–200) enigmatically proposes that naming objects is a kind of call that 'bids' humans to come nearer to things in the world: 'Bidding is inviting. It invites things in, so that they may bear upon men as things. . .In the naming, the things named are called into their thinging. Thinging they unfold world.. . . Thinging, they gesture–gestate–world.'

View 2: The symbolic perspective: Words

The focus on language as symbolic representation in psychological anthropology is generally narrowed to individual words.

The emphasis on language as words in psycho-cultural anthropology means that there is a heavy reliance on only one linguistic unit to capture relevant meanings. Moreover, while words have an internal morphological structure, often words are given only loose glosses in translations. The fascination with words is a legacy of structuralist anthropology's focus on Saussure's (1959) *langue*, with its semantic fields and paradigmatic features. In psycho-cultural anthropology, single words continue to figure large, especially as cultural keys to fathoming the ethos of a community.

The focus on words is also heavily present in Lacanian influenced scholarship, which disparages the violence of words as authoritative 'master signifiers' that lock concepts into symbolic fields. Žižek (2008: 54), for example, argues that 'when we name gold "gold" we violently extract a metal from its natural texture, investing

into it our dreams of wealth, power, spiritual purity, and so on, which have nothing to do with the immediate reality of gold.'

Language, of course, is more than words. Language users combine words into larger units to express complex meaning relations. While appreciating the despair over the imposition of public signifiers, as a linguistic anthropologist I am under the thrall of how morpho-syntactic forms encode all-important temporal, epistemic, affective, modal, actional, stative, attributive, and locative meanings. I have used these forms to illuminate the subjective and intersubjective worlds of children diagnosed with autism, adults with agoraphobia, physicists struggling to understand atomic spins, and the development of compassion cross-culturally (cf. Capps and Ochs 1995; Ochs et al. 1996; Ochs and Izquierdo 2010; Ochs and Solomon 2010). And I am baffled why psychological anthropology so often does not insist on finer linguistic discriminations in fathoming the socio-cultural and individual architecture of mental processes, states, and conditions.

View 3: The indexical perspective

The incomplete, indexical character of language is largely underappreciated in anthropological studies of culture and experience.

The incompleteness of language – that language cannot put all ideas and sentiments into words – has been widely addressed in anthropology and other disciplines. Yet, in important ways, the incompleteness of language begs further consideration.

What is striking is that noticings of language's incapacities tend to be linked to extremities of life experience such as intense pain, loss, trauma and subtle, ineffable thoughts and feelings. From a linguistic perspective, however, these poignant and important cases manifest a far more systemic property of languages, namely that languages are built to be incomplete representations of the world. As Briggs (2002: 483) reminds us, Boas (1965: 189) pointed out in his early writings on Native American languages and cultures that languages cannot and do not provide one-on-one mappings of forms to meanings, since 'the range of personal experience is infinitely varied'. Instead, languages are inherently categorical, with a limited set of forms available to convey a range of meanings. Languages are imprecise in expressing all sorts of meanings, from colors to sounds to tastes to mathematical functions.

For Lacanians and neo-Whorfians alike, it is precisely language's systemic condensation of meanings that compresses and distorts human experience. Yet what is missing from some of these arguments is the fact that the incompleteness of language on the symbolic level is compensated somewhat by the additional *indexical* capacity of language. In Peirce's account (1931–58: 324), a semiotic index conveys meaning through an awareness of an existential, cultural, physical, or personal association obtaining among objects. The index points a hearer's attention to a mental representation (e.g. a rise in temperature) associated with another mental

representation (e.g. mercury level in thermometer). The index does not resemble the object it represents.

Indexicality assumes reliance on the immediate context of situation and the broader context of culture, as Malinowski (1935) would say, to be understood. Perhaps the purist exemplar of an indexical form is the pronoun 'I', which indicates a self in an immediate or removed, but always relevant, context. What is critical is that the pronominal form 'I' is relatively empty without the context. As noted incisively by Silverstein (1996), language cannot be understood independently of the context; it is integral to, indeed presupposes and constitutes, the world in which it is embedded. In the case at hand, the pronoun 'I' and the situated self each bring the other into existence. Similarly, Agamben (1993: 94–5) points out that pronouns do not presuppose; rather, pronouns are themselves *exposures* of being.

The indexical character of language reaches far beyond pronouns. Communication rests upon a kind of conceptual language-context orchestration that members of communities are capable of imagining, wherein language forms provide just enough meaning to invoke past, present, and irrealis contexts of cultural and/or personal relevance. Morrison captured this capacity in her Nobel Lecture: 'Language arcs towards the place where meaning may lie' (1994: 20). This is a beautiful image of indexicality as not so much an explicit pointing to a context that is outside of language, but rather a gesturing of language towards a potential realm of meanings that are brought into consciousness through the linguistic gesture. Indexicality exquisitely displays how incompleteness systematically and creatively brings together language and context. Like Agamben's analysis of the term 'shoe' and the object shoe, language and the world, language and subjectivity, language and emotion, language and consciousness are intertwined and bring each other into meaningful being, for better or for worse.

View 4: The phenomenological perspective

Psychological anthropology's focus on language as symbol and related preoccupation with authenticity has largely occluded a view of everyday speech as an experience in itself.

The discussion thus far has been inching towards a larger point regarding the relation of everyday speech to experience. In advocating that language be considered within psychological anthropology as not only symbolic and separated from the world but also indexically part of the world, I am petitioning to view ordinary enactments of language as *modes of experiencing the world*. This phenomenological view takes inspiration from Hymes's (1972) emphasis on verbal performance as a complex accomplishment in its own right and Williams's (1977) insistence that speaking is not merely an expression of language as a fixed, objective system, but rather a primal activity of self-creation.

This argument is related to but not the same as the idea that language shapes experience, a perspective that has deep roots in the writings of Boas (1911), Sapir

(1921, 1927), Whorf (1956) and scholarship on linguistic relativity (cf. Gumperz and Levinson 1991; Lucy 1997). The phenomenological view is also related, but not equivalent, to the idea that language is a form of action, as in philosophical approaches to performatives (Austin 1962; Butler 1997) and speech acts (Searle 1964). Performatives and speech acts are generally analyzed as modes of social conduct whose force depends upon certain situated felicity conditions. The phenomenological perspective adds that beyond doing things, enactments of language are *experienced* as they are produced (Bauman 1977b; Briggs 1993) and as they are perceived (Heidegger 1971).

The experiential quality of language is ubiquitous in everyday social life, but is especially salient in the discourse of children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (Ochs and Solomon 2005). Consider, for example, how Adam, an 11-year-old boy diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome, recounts his first day at middle school to his mother. With great relish Adam recounts the precise times (bolded in transcript) when class periods begin and end.

Adam:	((*smiling voice*)) you would think the ti:mes are crazy.
	((*breathy*)) The TIMES when the period ends
	and this period starts are UNBELIE:VABLE!
Mother:	Why? ((*laughs*))
Adam:	hh ((*short laugh*)) The first period starts at eight-thirty-ONE!
	Not eight-thirty!
Mother:	Oh, that's interes[ting.
Adam:	[((*smiling voice*)) And ends –
Mother:	That's why– you know WHY:?
	Because they figure everybody's going to be in their place at eight-thirty.
	Well does the bell ring at twenty-five after?
	Or are you just supposed to be there at eight-[thirty?
Adam:	[No, it rings at, rings –
	There's three bells.
Mother:	[Okay
Adam:	[One at twenty-seven after? ((*claps hands*))
Mother:	Okay, warning bell.
Adam:	And then there's one at twenty-five ((*claps hands*))
	And then one at twenty ((*claps hands*))
Mother:	O:h?! So you don't need a watch! ((*laughs*))
Adam:	Yeah hhaaa ((*laughs*))
Mother:	So you all know what bell it is, yeah.
Adam:	Yeah!
Mother:	Well that help – that's helpful.
Adam:	Yeah. And then, so the- the first class, Mrs. Brown's
	class, starts at eight-thirty-ONE.
Mother:	Oh ((*unintelligible utterance*))

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Adam:      and E:NDS? [you will think this is really crazy –
Mother:                [Eh- (.) at nine [fifteen?
Adam:                            [at nine-twenty-EIGHT.
Mother:  Oh, that's a long class!
Adam:    Yeah! At nine-twenty-EIGHT.
         And then –
Mother:  It's almost an hour.
Adam:    ((smiling voice)) Yeah.
         So then it ends at nine-twenty-eight.
Mother:  Hmm.
Adam:    So, then that's that,
         and then so, at nine-twenty-eight,
         I walked over to Mrs. Kretsch's room.
```

In this passage Adam's language transports him and his mother inside the temporal domain of Mrs Brown's first-period class. In so doing, they live out a phenomenological sensibility akin to 'dwelling' (Heidegger 1971) and 'tarrying' (Gadamer 1986). Dwelling is characterized by actively, creatively being present, and tarrying by being under the thrall of a focal object and 'enveloped in a time that does not pass' (Ross 2006: 106). Adam and his mother lose themselves in school bells that ring at precise moments ('Eight-thirty-ONE! Not eight-thirty!'). Adam's breathy, affect-filled repetitions, related to an autistic proclivity to perseverate (Frith 1989), lock them into dwelling on a moment ('At nine-twenty-EIGHT'; 'At nine-twenty-EIGHT'; 'at nine-twenty-eight'; 'at nine-twenty-eight') and a procession of bells that go backwards in time ('One at twenty-seven after?'; 'And then there's one at twenty-five.'; 'And then one at twenty.'). Like rocking back and forth and spinning, the voiced repetitions, sequences, and contrasts of the class times are co-experienced as emergent sources of pleasure and shared laughter.

The phenomenological quality of utterances – spoken, written, or signed; casual or formal; idle chatter or poetic epiphany – is a linguistic potentiality across the life span. English-speaking toddlers, for example, carry on conversations with nonsense syllables, taboo words, and/or sound play, which can land them in fits of giggles (Keenan 1974). Baby talk, with its heightened pitch, exaggerated intonation, stretched out sounds, reduplications, endearments, and infantilized lexicon, has the phenomenological potential to immerse interlocutors in an affective zone of intense intimacy (Ferguson 1977). In the throes of scientific problem-solving, physicists produce syntactically liminal utterances (e.g. 'Why don't I go to the long-range ordered phase in the Kleeman experiment?') that take them on 'interpretive journeys' and blur the line between them ('I') and the physical dynamics of entities they are struggling to explain, e.g. atomic particles undergoing phase transitions (Ochs et al. 1996).

The phenomenological view of language and experience is compatible with Heidegger's (1971: 197) insistence that, ultimately, language is not under the control of interlocutors: 'In its essence language is neither expression nor an activity of man. Language speaks.' Language speaks, in the sense that signs call out meanings,

bring them to us and create the worlds in which we dwell. Heidegger suggests that for language to speak to those present, they need to be attuned to the force of the language at hand. They need to be 'responsive' to the bidding of language. This does not mean that human beings are passive to the whims of language; to the contrary, the appeal is for each person to be attuned to the bidding of his or her own imaginative language forays.

The phenomenological view of language counterposes the idea that speaking and listening, writing and reading, are unconscious, automatic roll-outs of thoughts and feelings formulated anterior to and outside of enactments of language. Rather, subjective experience is formed to an as yet undetermined extent in the course of phonological and orthographic enactments. At the interface of linguistic and psycho-cultural anthropology lies the intellectual prospect of fathoming how members of communities experience meaning as it unfolds. In this perspective, unfolding meaning becomes a personal and social creation, wherein, unlike a hand fan unfurling in a pre-determined array, significance is built through and experienced in temporal bursts of sense-making, often in coordination with others, often left hanging in realms of ambiguity.

Linguistic anthropology shares with psychological anthropology the idea that experience is a watershed between the individual and the social. In this perspective, thoughts and feelings are not so much things as they are courses that run through and revise our being in the world. As Agamben suggests in *The Coming Community* (1993: 19), 'the passage from potentiality to act... is not an event accomplished once and for all, but an infinite series of modal oscillations. The individuation of a singular existence is not a punctual fact, but... varies in every direction according to a continual gradation of growth and remission, of appropriation and impropriation.' Yet, while linguistic and psychological anthropologists alike struggle to fathom the experiential contours of person and society (starting from at least the writings of Sapir 1993), there is not nearly enough rigorous bridging of our sub-fields in this scholarly undertaking (for exceptional bridging cf. Garro and Mattingly 2000; Throop 2003, 2010). The spotty points of contact across the sub-fields have meant that we understand little about how embodied, situated enactments of language *in situ* articulate with thinking, feeling, consciousness, and the 'incessant emergence' of existence (Agamben 1993: 19).

Those who have studied language are awe-struck by the rapid, nuanced working of phonological, morpho-syntactic, lexical, and discursive forms in evolving and involving social encounters. Like colors on a palette, language forms bring canvases of the imagination to life one breath at a time. The palette is differentially accessible – not just anyone can dip their brush to mark a particular existential situation – but at the least, the palette of language is a community heirloom, infused with pigments and residues of past expressive works that inspire the unfolding sense-making at hand. In time, the color of language brings into being imagined selves, imagined others, anxieties, memories, anticipations, and other psychological states. As the colors are applied, they run into each other and change hue. That is, the unfolding of meaning is not additive – one color plus another color – it is

transformative, such that the making of a phrase, a clause, a sentence, a turn, a story, a lament, a diagnosis is always a becoming into being.

The work of Goodwin (1981) and Schegloff (2007) demonstrate that the production of an utterance is often a social and psychological journey full of uncertainties and transformations that can be tracked moment by moment. A rich example of this phenomenon is Goodwin's (1995) depiction of how an aphasic man who could utter only three words – 'yes,' 'no' and 'and' – creatively, through the incorporation of gestures, and collaboratively, with the involvement of intimates, managed over a series of back-and-forth, trial-and-error interactional turns to communicate and thereby bring into social consciousness his memories, desires, queries, and assessments. Goodwin's account explicates how language and the body *in situ* form a cogent semiotic matrix in the temporal unfolding of meaning. Speakers start out saying one thought then retool the meaning in the course of the utterance; they constantly monitor eye gaze and facial expressions of those around them and modulate their stances and messages accordingly.

While it cannot be claimed that ordinary conversation is flooded with full-blown phenomenological modifications in which the world as interlocutors know it is re-envisioned, it *is* the site of constant instances of incipient *epoché* or phenomenal bracketings (Duranti 2009; Husserl 1989, 1991), jumpstarted by hesitations, word searches, and self-repairs. Experience-near concepts, in this light, are far from unself-conscious, as Geertz (1983) once posited. And if self is made most evident in conditions of uncertainty, then ordinary informal conversation is the baroque site for working out situated versions of who we think we are through clumsy propositions in the making and disjointed narratives of personal experience.

Appropriating Dilthey's distinction between 'mere experience' and 'an experience' (1976) and Dewey's (1934) notion that aesthetic forms are grounded in human experience, Turner (1986) proposed that social dramas enacted in theater and ritual bring participants into an experience through the power of aesthetics and performance. What I am petitioning here is an extension of these existential affordances to everyday informal encounters. In between the categories of 'mere experience' and 'an experience' there is a way of *living* experience that comes close to Husserl's (1991) and Gadamer's (1986) idea of experience and the life-world as a process. In this perspective, semiotic enactments are temporally unfolding experiences, whose configuration at any moment is influenced by the voices, bodies, and dispositions of others present and non-present and a calculation of the situation at hand.

Turner further argued that theatre transpires in 'the subjunctive mood of culture', i.e. 'the mood of maybe, might be, as if, hypothesis, fantasy, conjecture, desire', while ordinary life transpires in 'the indicative mood, where we expect the invariant operation of cause and effect, of rationality and commonsense' (1986: 42). The work of linguistic anthropologists and discourse analysts undermines this distinction. Indeed, the subjunctive mood is very much in evidence in ordinary life, where doubt is endemic and where causal relations and logics are pieced together contingently, situationally, and non-linearly as much as they are

drawn from a bank of a priori knowledge, beliefs, dispositions, and expectations. An example of the subjunctive mood in everyday talk comes from the Capps and Ochs (1995) study of a woman diagnosed with agoraphobia, whose daily anxiety-filled verbal ruminations about the fearful possibilities of situations persuades her to remain within a confined area close to home. During one dinnertime, for example, she tells her husband and children what could happen if a pit bull owned by her father-in-law's neighbor were to get loose: 'What if that thing gets loose? And kills somebody?' (1995: 126). As she imagines scenarios of the pit bull, her young son is captivated and mimetically opens and closes his jaws like a pit bull. The whole family becomes drawn into the flames of 'what if' panic-laden potentialities of life.

In this phenomenological perspective, utterance meaning cannot always be treated as a holistic proposition; rather, meaning is evolving over interactional time as an interpretive experience. A good example of unfolding meaning is Carrithers' (2008) analysis of the first reports of smoke rising from the North Tower of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. News anchor Diane Sawyer ('DS') shifted from the reportage genre to a personal reaction to the uncertainties of the situation. Her voice revealed her emotionally charged moment-by-moment living experience of seeing flames and imagining what might be happening (Carrithers 2008: 171):

> There is a slight catch in DS's voice as she says this, and one can understand why. At this point little new information is available, but a sense of this as a 'major incident'... is sinking in ... DS ... finds herself throwing her rhetorical imagination into what is displayed on the screen ... [Q]uite despite the constraints of journalistic convention and the lack of close information from the Twin Towers, DS moves our imagination from the only very vaguely adumbrated, indeed mostly only implicit, inchoate pronouns which have appeared so far, to discover a set of generic nouns which are richly evocative, and far more specific. These are not only 'people'; they are 'regular workers,' who have to be there every day; they are 'tourists,' who have come for ... recreation and enlightenment; and above all, they are 'families,' who have with them the unmentioned, but inescapably suggested, 'children,' with all the vulnerability and pathos of that word.

Diane Sawyer's language, together with the compelling televised images, carries her and viewers into the unfolding tragedy.

Given the temporally unfolding experiential potential of language, meaning is not simply the sum of its sign objects at different points in utterance time (Goodwin 1981). Instead, meaning is progressive and non-linear, reaching from utterance to situation and back, building and transcending momentary interpretations. Scholars have yet to grasp how to analyze the evolving paths and facets of sense-making, despite Grice's (1968) call to distinguish between the utterer's meaning, sentence-meaning, and word-meaning. Often transcripts and translations in anthropology articles plunk utterances down in their entirety, but this practice belies the temporal experience of ordinary meaning-making, in which feelings may accrue and

diminish, thoughts may be initiated and withdrawn, repetitions may evoke poetic qualities, and the sound of one's own and others' intonations, voice qualities, and rhythms, or, alternatively, one's own or one's interlocutors' silences, feed back into the living experience of enacted language.

Coda

It is the aim of this essay to invite a broader morality of everyday language in motion as a source of vitality beyond stifled conventionalism. Alongside the hero of Lacan, who breaks away from conventional societal technologies, including language, to carve an authentic self,[3] there is another kind of hero. While acknowledging the ravages of institutional discourses, we can also construe the hero as one who allows herself or himself to be vulnerable to the contingent informality of ordinary enacted language and thereby to learn; that is, to grow. In other words, take a close look at the unfolding ordinary utterance to find the imaginary intertwined with the conventional. Interlocutors involved in everyday situations are certainly at times consumed by conventional tropes; but, at other times, they are thoroughly consumed by the imaginative force of language at hand or are uncertain, awkward crafters of meaning, painting and repainting what matters in the flow of their lives.

Unlike formal events in which topic, order, code, and participation are pre-regulated (Irvine 1979), informal situations are at once regulated and emergent on-line, as it were. Even seemingly mindless conversational routines have unexpected turns and as such are 'interactional achievements', as Schegloff (1987) tells us. And in informal conversation, topics wander recklessly far from expectations, conflicts and misunderstandings erupt, and emotions turn hot or cold in a flash. Recounting a narrative of past experience may suddenly give way to present-time feelings of anxiety and betrayal that rush forth in and through talk and hurtful actions. For example, after eating spicy guacamole at dinner, an American middle-class mother and her son recalled an incident in which the son accidentally ate a chili pepper when he was a toddler (Ochs 1994). Suddenly, the recollection erupted into a present-time accusation and a tit-for-tat physical attack by the son on the mother. The son shouted, 'YOUR FAULT! YOUR FAULT!' while reaching over and pinching his mother's cheeks. The mother, startled, holds a napkin against her cheeks and gasps, 'It *was* my fault, honey'. Perfectly ordinary co-narration among family members and friends can wander all over the temporal map and transport interlocutors into zones of the moral imaginary that are unexpected and at times startling.

Such vicissitudes of emotion have been examined in psychotherapeutic encounters, but we know very little indeed about *in situ* temporally developing and enveloping flows of emotion in informal communication around the world. The biblical story of Samson and Delilah strikes me as an apt trope for what can happen when one goes home to the contingencies of domestic life. One's secrets

may be revealed and powers diminished, all at the beckoning of an intimate in the throes of spontaneous informality.

This essay petitions anthropologists addressing culture and experience to infuse sensibilities about existential doubt, suffering, desire, morality, empathy, mind-reading, healing, temporality, transformation, sense of self, and the making of persons with complementary sensibilities about the indexical formation of language-and-context as a primal unit of meaning-making and perfectly ordinary utterances in everyday life as themselves experiential moments that have everything to do with the psychic management of life's contingencies. In this interdisciplinary petition, the distinction between experience-near and experience-distant as conceptualized in the realm of anthropological scholarship misses the fundamental point that language, once in motion, and experience are conjoined. Experience, even the drama of pain and suffering, lies outside, inside, and alongside enacted language as its indexical and phenomenological resource.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. Moreover, Bourdieu writes (1991: 170): 'What creates the power of words and slogans, a power capable of maintaining or subverting the social order, is the belief in the legitimacy of words and of those who utter them. And words alone cannot create this belief.'
2. Geertz's explanatory blendings of experience-near and experience-distant language to transcend cultural paradigms are reminiscent of Bakhtin's (1981) point that all texts are essentially dialogic and heteroglossic, containing others' words with our own. Both Geertz and Bakhtin privilege textual hybridity as a path to overcoming hermeneutic challenges.
3. On the need to torture language to reach what is real in psychotherapy, Lacan (1999: 288) writes:
   This would lead us to the paradox of conceiving that discourse in an analytic session is worthwhile only insofar as it stumbles or even interrupts itself – were not the session itself instituted as a break in a false discourse, that is, in what discourse realizes when it becomes empty as speech, when it is no more than the worn coinage Mallarmé speaks of that is passed from hand to hand 'in silence.'

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