Key Terms in Language and Culture

Edited by

Alessandro Duranti

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CONTRIBUTORS

Asif Agha Department of Anthropology, University of Pennsylvania, 33rd and Spruce Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104-6398.
asifagha@sas.upenn. edu

Laura M. Ahearn Department of Anthropology, University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC 29208.
ahearn@sc.edu

Celso Alvarez-Cáccamo Linguística Geral, Faculdade de Filologia, Universidade da Corunha, 15071 A Corunha, Galiza, Spain.
lxalvarz@udc.es

Benjamin Bailey Department of Anthropology, Box 6000, Binghamton University, Binghamton, NY 13902-6000.
bbailey@binghamton.edu

Giorgio Banti Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli, Italy. Mailing address: via le del Vignola 73, I-00196 Roma, Italy.
g.banti@agora.stm.it

Patricia Baquedano-López Graduate School of Education, University of California, Berkeley, Berkeley, CA 94720-1670.
pbl@uclink4.berkeley.edu

John Baugh School of Education, Stanford University, Stanford, CA 94305.
jbaugh@leland.stanford.edu

Richard Bauman Folklore Institute, Indiana University, 504 North Fess, Bloomington, IN 47405.
bauman@indiana.edu

William O. Beeman Department of Anthropology, Brown University, Providence, RI 02912.
william_beeman@brown.edu

Dan Ben-Amos Department of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, University of Pensylvania, Philadelphia, PA 19104-6305.
dbamos@sas.upenn.edu

Niko Besnier Department of Anthropology, Victoria University of Wellington, P.O. Box 600, Wellington 6000, New Zealand.
niko.besnier@vuw.ac.nz

Susan D. Blum Department of Anthropology, 314 O'Shaughnessy Hall, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN 46656.
Susan.Blum.24@nd.edu

Charles L. Briggs Department of Ethnic Studies, University of California, San Diego, La Jolla, CA 92093-0522.
clbriggs@weber.ucsd.edu

Penelope Brown Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, PB 310, NL 6500 AH Nijmegen, Netherlands.
penelope.brown@mpi.nl

Mary Bucholtz Department of English, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX 77843-4227.
bucholtz@tamu.edu

Aaron V. Cicourel Department of Cognitive Science, 9500 Gilman Drive, Dept. 0515, University of California, San Diego, La Jolla, CA 92093-0515.
cicourel@cogsci.ucsd.edu

Haruko M. Cook Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures, University of Hawaii at Manoa, 1890 East West Road, Honolulu, HI 96822.
hkcook@hawaii.edu

Regna Darnell Department of Anthropology, University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario N6A 5C2, Canada.
rdarnell@julian.uwo.ca

John W. Du Bois Department of Linguistics, University of California, Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, CA 93106.
dubois@humanitas.ucsb.edu

Alessandro Duranti Department of Anthropology, University of California, Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1553.
aduranti@ucla.edu

Joseph Errington Department of Anthropology, 51 Hillhouse Avenue, Yale University, New Haven, CT 06520-8277.
j.errington@yale.edu

Susan Ervin-Tripp Department of Psychology, University of California, Berkeley, Berkeley, CA 94720-0001.
ervin-tr@cogsci.berkeley.edu

Steven Feld Department of Anthropology, New York University, 25 Waverly Place, New York, NY 10003.

Aaron Fox Department of Music, MC 1822, Dodge Hall, Columbia University, New York, NY, 10027.

Kathleen R. Gibson Department of Basic Sciences, University of Texas Houston, Dental Branch, P.O. Box 20068, Houston, TX 77225.
kgibson@mail.db.uth.tmc.edu

Victor Golla Department of Native American Studies, Humboldt State University, Arcata, CA 95521.
vkg1@humboldt.edu

Ward H. Goodenough Department of Anthropology, University of Pennsylvania, 33rd and Spruce Streets, Philadelphia, PA 19104-6398.
whgooden@sas.upenn.edu

Charles Goodwin Department of Applied Linguistics, University of California, Los Angeles, 3300 Rolfe Hall, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1531.
cgoodwin@humnet.ucla.edu

Marjorie H. Goodwin Department of Anthropology, University of California, Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1553.
mgoodwin@anthro.ucla.edu

Laura R. Graham Department of Anthropology, 114 MH, University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA 52242.
laura-graham@uiowa.edu

Allen D. Grimshaw 2211 Woodstock Place, Bloomington, IN 47401.
grimsha@indiana.edu

John J. Gumperz Department of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley, Berkeley, CA 94720.
gumperz@education.ucsb.edu

Kira Hall Department of Anthropology, 51 Hillhouse Avenue, Yale University, New Haven, CT 06520-8277.
kira.hall@yale.edu

William F. Hanks Department of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720-3710.
wfhanks@nwu.edu

John B. Haviland Department of Anthropology, Reed College, Portland, OR 97202.
Johnh@reed.edu

Jane H. Hill Department of Anthropology, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ 85721.
jhill@u.arizona.edu

Ingjerd Hoëm University of Oslo, Department of Linguistics, P.O. Box 1102, Blindern, N-0317 Oslo, Norway.
ingjerd.hoem@ilf.uio.no

Dell Hymes Department of Anthropology, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA 22903.

Vyacheslav Ivanov Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, University of California, Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA 90095-150205.
ivanov@ucla.edu

Sally Jacoby Department of Communication, University of New Hampshire, Horton Social Science Center, 20 College Road, Durham, NH 03824-3586.
swj@hopper.unh.edu

Marco Jacquemet Department of Anthropology, Barnard College, 3009 Broadway, New York, NY 10027.
mjacquem@barnard. columbia.edu

Barbara Johnstone Department of English, Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, PA 15213-3890.
bj4@andrew.cmu.edu

Christine Jourdan Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Concordia University, 1455 de Maisonneuve W., Montreal H3G 1M8, Canada.
jourdan@vax2.concordia.ca

Paul Kay Department of Linguistics, University of California, Berkeley, Berkeley, CA 94720.
kay@cogsci.berkeley.edu

Webb Keane Department of Anthropology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48109.
wkeane@umich.edu

Elizabeth Keating Department of Anthropology, University of Texas, Austin, TX 78712-1086.
ekeating@mail.utexas.edu

Harriet E. Manelis Klein Department of Linguistics, State University of New York at Stony Brook, Stony Brook, NY 11794.
hklein@notes.cc.sunysb.edu

Paul V. Kroskrity Department of Anthropology and Interdepartmental Program in American Indian Studies, University of California, Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1553.
paulvk@ucla.edu

Joel Kuipers Department of Anthropology, 2112 G Street NW, X201, George Washington University, Washington, DC 20052.
kuipers@gwu.edu

John Leavitt Départment d'Anthropologie, Université de Montréal, C.P. 6128, Succursale Centre-Ville, Montréal, Quebec, H3C 3J7, Canada.

Stephen C. Levinson Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, P.O. Box 310, NL-6500 AH Nijmegen, The Netherlands.
levinson@mpi.nl

John A. Lucy Committee on Human Development, University of Chicago, 5730 S. Woodlawn Ave., Chicago, IL 60637.
johnlucy@midway.uchicago.edu

Bruce Mannheim Department of Anthropology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48109.
brucem@quriurqu.anthro.lsa.umich.edu

Norma Mendoza-Denton Department of Anthropology, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ 85721-0030.
nmd@u.arizona.edu

Leila Monaghan Department of Anthropology, Temple University, Philadelphia, PA 19122.

Robert E. Moore Department of Anthropology, New York University, 25 Waverly Place, New York, NY 10003.
rem10@is5.nyu.edu

Marcyliena M. Morgan Department of Anthropology, University of California, Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1553.
mhmorgan@ucla.edu

Elinor Ochs Department of Anthropology, University of California, Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1552.
ochs@humnet.ucla.edu

Carol Padden Department of Communication, University of California, San Diego, La Jolla, CA 92093.
cpadden@ucsd.edu

Mariella Pandolfi Départment d'Anthropologie, Université de Montréal, C.P. 6128, Succursale Centre-Ville, Montréal, Quebec, H3C 3J7, Canada.
pandolfm@anthro. umontreal.ca

Antonio Perri Via Baldo degli Ubaldi 96, 00167 Rome, Italy.
a.perri@pronet.it

Susan U. Philips Department of Anthropology, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ 85721.
sphilips@u.arizona.edu

Ben Rampton King's College London, School of Education, Waterloo Road, London, SE1 8WA, United Kingdom.
ben.rampton@kcl.ac.uk

Alan Rumsey Australian National University, Canberra, ACT 0200, Australia.
alan.rumsey@anu.edu.au

Betsy Rymes Department of Language Education, The University of Georgia, Athens, GA 30602-7123.
brymes@coe.uga.edu

R. Keith Sawyer Department of Education, Washington University, Campus Box 1183, St. Louis, MO 63130.
ksawyer@artsci.wustl.edu

Marina Sbisà Dipartimento di Filosofia, Università di Trieste, via dell' Università 7, 34123 Trieste, Italy.
sbisama@univ.trieste.it

John H. Schumann Applied Linguistics, 3300 Rolfe Hall, UCLA, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1531.
schumann@humnet.ucla.edu

Ron Scollon Department of Linguistics, Georgetown University, Washington, DC 20057.
scollonr@gusun.georgetown.edu

Jack Sidnell Department of Anthropology, Northwestern University, 1810 Hinman Avenue, Evanston, IL 60201.
jsidnell@nwu.edu

Michael Silverstein Department of Anthropology, University of Chicago, 1126 East 59th Street, Chicago, IL 60637-1539.
m-silverstein@uchicago.edu

Debra Spitulnik Department of Anthropology, Emory University, 1557 Pierce Drive, Atlanta, GA 30322.

Dennis Tedlock Department of English, SUNY at Buffalo, Buffalo, NY 14260.
dtedlock@acsu.buffalo.edu

James Wilce Department of Anthropology, Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff, AZ 86011-5200.
jim.wilce@nau.edu

Kwesi Yankah Linguistics department, University of Ghana, Legon, Ghana.
kwyankah@libr.ug.edu.gh

PREFACE

In the winter of 1998, I volunteered to organize an "educational" session on the state of the art in linguistic anthropology for the Annual Meetings of the American Anthropological Association, to be held in December in Philadelphia. The session, one of a series for each of the major subfields in anthropology, was meant to inform the AAA members about contemporary research in linguistic anthropology.

I thought that the best way to accomplish this goal was to invite as many people as possible to talk about what they knew best about language matters in anthropology. As the number of contributors and topics grew, I realized that despite the three hours and forty five minutes alloted for the session, there was not going to be sufficient time for a series of fifteen-minute papers. One solution was to limit the time of each presentation to seven minutes. That is how the idea of papers structured as entries of a lexicon emerged. I asked each author to write about one thousand words on one key concept in the study of language. The result was a very original and thought-provoking series of statements that kept the audience at the AAA meetings engaged for almost four hours (the room was filled beyond capacity and many people could not get in). After the session, I decided that the papers should be collected and published. Free from the temporal constraints of the meetings, I also realized that I could include other topics and authors. As I approached more colleagues or wrote again to those who had not been able to participate in the session because of previous commitments, the list grew to include about ninety potential contributors. Of those to whom I wrote, the great majority responded with enthusiasm, despite the short notice and the close deadline I had set. The question then arose as to where to publish the papers. I thought that the *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* would be the ideal place to publish the entries. Under editors Ben Blount and Judith Irvine, the journal has acquired a reputation for high quality contributions in a wide range of research topics and paradigms within our field. This book reproduces the special issue (*JLA* vol. 9) I edited under the title *Language Matters in Anthropology: A Lexicon for the Millennium*, an ambitious collective attempt to push the

boundaries of our discipline even further into realms that just a generation ago would not have been thought of as linguistic anthropology. The contributors to this collection give voice to research programs and intellectual agendas that, each in their own unique way, celebrate the complexity and the richness of language as the ever present instrument and living record of the human experience on Earth.

Most of the contributors to this volume are linguistic anthropologists, but there are also colleagues from other fields, including folklore, linguistics, philosophy of language, psychology, sociology, ethnomusicology, conversation analysis, biological anthropology, and medical anthropology. Although not everything you always wanted to know about linguistic anthropology – or language – is represented here, the entries and authors in this issue cover a vast territory of knowledge about linguistic matters. They are written to inform, suggest, provoke, and open up new horizons while looking back at our relatively short, no more than a century-long, history. If they succeed in engaging the readers with new ideas and making them reconsider or deepen their views of language matters, they will have accomplished their goal.

This project required a considerable amount of work by many people. I want to thank all the contributors for their willingness to adapt to the format of the entries and the strict deadlines without losing their creativity. The original session was made possible by the encouragement of the 1998 Annual Meetings Program Chair, Susan Greenhalgh, and the hard work of Lucille Horn at the AAA office in Arlington. In editing the volume, corresponding with the contributors, and making sure that I would not forget anything or anyone, I was fortunate to have the support of three skillful and energetic editorial assistants, Adrienne Lo, Sarah Meacham, and Vincent Barletta. Finally, this was my first collaboration with the publication staff at the AAA headquarters. Many thanks to John Neikirk, Neada Ross-Fleming, and the rest of the staff who made this at first improbable enterprise something that you can hold in your hands and read. The publication of the *JLA* special issue as *Key Terms in Language and Culture* would not have been possible without the skillful negotiation and support of Susi Skomal at AAA headquarters and Jane Huber at Blackwell, and without the expert editorial assistance of Margaret Aherne. I am also grateful to Tracy Rone for compiling the index.

In making the original collection available to a wider audience, I hope that this book will invite reflections and reactions that will widen and deepen our understanding of and commitment to the study of language as both a human capacity and a human activity.

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■ *Susan Ervin-Tripp*

Acquisition

Acquisition of a language refers to learning enough about it to understand what speakers mean. A language used in late childhood for inner speech and abstraction can survive in memory the rest of life, as we see in the last speakers of dying languages. What's acquired is knowledge of the sound system of an oral language, syntax, vocabulary or lexical system, semantics underlying both, and the pragmatic or sociolinguistic system that relates language to conditions of use.

Three conditions are necessary for acquisition: capacity, access, and motive. Language requires the capacity to form classes of classes, an ability only humans have. There must also be a peripheral system – touch, vision, or sound. Both cognitive and social development in children affect the order of acquisition. The increase in capacity, as well as transfer from first language, explains why second languages are acquired so fast in late childhood. On the other hand, after puberty, a first language has never been learned successfully, and attaining the skill of a native speaker of a second language is variable.

Second, there must be access to exchanges with others in which language forms co-occur with information about meanings. This is necessary for semantic mapping to forms. What is learned about forms from access includes what forms occur together, what is happening physically and socially at the time, who is speaking, and so on. Where there is a regular, distinctive co-occurrence of any of these events with linguistic form, the information may be stored. Language is acquired readily from siblings and older play partners because they are likely to provide frequent and easy conditions for mapping.

Third, there has to be a motive to attend to or to speak a language. While not an issue for dependent infants, if speakers of a variety aren't valued, listeners may not get enough access to come to understand new vocabulary, styles, dialects, or languages, and they may be even more unwilling to be heard speaking in other varieties. This is a place where social ideology has an impact on acquisition. In relaxed informal speech, phonetic choices, vocabulary, and other aspects of style reflect the speech of valued others, usually of

childhood peers. However, we know that children have heard and stored a great variety of detailed information about who talks, and how, because we see it if four-year-olds do role-playing, as demonstrated by Elaine Andersen.

All the components of language are being developed simultaneously, but those aspects that reach their relatively mature state first are the phonological system, core syntax, and probably some basic aspects of the semantic system for the first language. Vocabulary growth is very sensitive to the physical and social environment, since it is a form of mapping of objects and concepts, as well as changes throughout life. It has three facets: the representation of the form of the word, its grammatical properties, and its denotation, connotations, and social implications. Taboo words and insults provide a clear case where the child often acquires these features separately.

Vocabulary development is both affected by and affects the semantic and cognitive organization of the child, so it can be a focus for socialization. The semantic system reflects those features that the syntax and vocabulary single out for marking, so it varies for different languages – for instance, differentiating tight and loose fit for some Korean prepositions, identifying shapes of objects for Navajo verbs, identifying sources of information for Turkish (which has evidential markers), and identifying age and status in Korean.

The structure of first sentences is sensitive to the context of language used for and by children. Two-year-olds' speech is usually brief – telegraphic – and often includes only the core information. In one language there may at first be much more naming of things, in another more naming of actions, or of changes of location or state. As children's capacity increases, they complicate syntax by including several types of information at once, such as place and action. They start to add formal features demanded by their particular language. If they speak a language that requires coding the gender of a speaker or the relative time an event occurred in every utterance, they begin adding that, though they may still have omissions at the age of three or four. Both complexity and ease of marking affect order; markers that are at the ends of turns are acquired earlier than those in the middle, just because of salience.

Traditionally, studies of acquisition focused most on the development of reference and ideational communication, but speech is also organized as to turn participation, speech actions, social relations marking, register or variety, speech genres like joking or narration, and speech events like weddings or trials. Children mark turn organization very early; by three they have replies with linguistic features showing dialog skill. In English we find "I can too" or "Because he does," and some topical coherence across turns. Infants first learn the speech acts, such as greeting rituals, that have similar turns to mimic. They use an increasing variety of kinds of acts during childhood – requesting, challenging, justifying, apologies, and so on. Linguistic forms that mark important or salient social acts are candidates for early acquisition, so they vary culturally. Complex genres and their situating in larger speech events can continue acquisition throughout life.

Social indices in speech range from address terms, to mitigating or aggravating of speech acts by tone of voice or explicit formal choices, to selection