# The Matrix of Language

## of

# Language

Contemporary

Linguistic

Anthropology

edited by

Donald Brenneis &
Ronald K.S. Macaulay

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PITZER COLLEGE

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*Dedicated to the memory of Ruth Borker,*
*colleague and friend*

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# 1
# Introduction

Since language enters into almost every facet of human experience, it is hardly surprising that it should be examined from a wide variety of perspectives. Philosophers, teachers, lawyers, advertisers, historians, politicians, comedians, and poets, to mention but a few, take a professional interest in language. Within the scientific study of language (linguistics) there is also great diversity, but the purpose of the present volume may best be clarified by contrasting four approaches to the study of language that are currently adopted by scholars.

The approach that is dominant in most U.S. university departments is that associated with the theories of Noam Chomsky. Starting with the publication of *Syntactic Structures* in 1957, Chomsky has placed the emphasis on studying "the system of knowledge attained and internally represented in the mind/brain" (1986:24). Central to Chomsky's purposes is a characterization of the universal qualities of language, that is, the features of language that make it possible for any normal infant to develop a knowledge of any human language, under widely varying conditions. Chomsky's approach requires a high degree of idealization: "Linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homeogeneous speech community" (1965: 3). In contrast, the authors of the chapters in this book are concerned with the speech of imperfect human beings in communities in which there is great diversity of speech.

A second approach, which deals with the "investigation of language within the social context of the community in which it is spoken" (Labov 1966:3), is that of sociolinguists. Most sociolinguists follow Labov's example in using quantitative methods to study the correlation of linguistic features with social factors. Quantitative measures and the asterisks of statistical significance will be rare (but not totally absent) in the pages that follow. Sociolinguists have generally concentrated on phonological and morphological features, and the central focus of Labov's work has been tracking sound changes in progress. The chapters in the present volume are less concerned with linguistic form and more with how language is used. The empirical work of the scholars represented here relies more on observation and the qualitative analysis of texts than on counting occurrences of variables.

A third approach to language is that employed by the practitioners of Conversation Analysis. The conversation analysts examine the ways in which speakers accomplish the remarkable task of participating in the fluent exchange of

utterances in a turn-taking schema that requires split-second timing and yet is accomplished without strain by almost every member of a speech community. The conversation analysts, however, for the most part deliberately ignore the social context in which the conversation takes place. In their own way, they are as concerned with abstract features as theoretical linguists, such as Chomsky.

The approach that characterizes the chapters in this volume sometimes falls under the rubric of ethnography of speaking (Hymes 1974) and sometimes under linguistic anthropology (Schieffelin 1993). Schieffelin summarized some of the interests of scholars in this discipline:

> In studies of language socialization, we look at how persons are socialized to use language(s) and socialized through language(s), throughout the life cycle, in households, workplaces and educational settings. How language is used in constituting power relationships, for example, in colonial and postcolonial contexts, in constructing ethnicity, gender and social class, are matters of concern. (1993:1)

Other areas of interest examined in this volume are verbal art and performance, including narrative, joking, and humor.

Theoretical linguists, taking physical science as the model for the scientific study of language, have, as it were, attempted to study language through a microscope, on the assumption that the universal structural characteristics of language can be identified in this way. Just as the specimen on the slide is often a fragment separated from a larger body, the forms of language studied by linguists using this approach are isolated from any actual situation in which they might have been used and examined as abstract, decontexualized, static examples. This approach emphasizes the importance of form over function.

An alternative scientific model for the description of language is that of the natural scientist studying animal behavior. In such an approach, the linguist observes how individuals in a society use language and attempts to create a coherent description of this usage. (The pioneer in this approach was Bronislaw Malinowski [1884–1942] whose work laid the foundations for anthropological linguistics.) Scholars working in this tradition take a dynamic view of language, seeing meaning, not in terms of dictionary definitions but as something socially negotiated. As M. M. Bakhtin pointed out, "it is not, after all, out of a dictionary that the speaker gets his words" rather he hears them "in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions" (Bakhtin 1981:294).

The ethnography of speaking lies at the core of a range of perspectives often labeled *discourse analysis*. Characteristic of these perspectives is a commitment to the thoroughgoing analysis of talk—and other uses of language—as social practice. Language is taken to be firmly lodged not only in immediate contexts of performance and use but within broader relationships often characterized by disparities in and contests over power and inflected by past events.

In one sense discourse analysis denotes a cluster of related techniques for describing what goes on when people speak with or to each other. Transcripts of ac-

tual talk play an important role in such descriptions as they make the detailed consideration of the contents and styles of particular events. Several of the chapters in this book provide detailed examples of such transcript analysis, whether in dinner table conversations (Ochs, Smith, and Taylor) or gossip (Brenneis). Other pieces, for example, Silverstein's examination of the notion of "standard language" or Feld and Schieffelin's consideration of "hardness" in Kaluli culture highlight particular key terms within specific discourses. Although scholars in other fields such as cultural studies often use discourse analysis to convey primarily this latter, meaning-focused sense (see Williams 1976 for examples of this strategy at its best), the linguistic anthropological studies represented here suggest the value of a fuller picture in which both the content and conduct of communication figure significantly.

In addition to denoting a range of techniques, discourse analysis often connotes a theoretical orientation within which language is seen as both reflecting and consequential for relationships of conflict, cooperation, and dominance within society. The chapters in Part Two illuminate the complexities of these relationships— and of how they might be studied—in regard to the question of gender and power. Several of the chapters in Part Three are concerned, at least in part, with the political meanings and implications of particular genres, as in Limón's consideration of joking in south Texas. The political dimensions of discourse lie at the heart of Part Four, although the chapters are concerned with a wide range of points at which language and power intersect. Brenneis and Myers, for example, are concerned with the constitutive role of particular communicative events, that is, with how they weave an interactional web, making both specific relationships and broader sociability possible. Other pieces, for example, Hill's, consider the complex ties among economic and political position and history, consciousness, and identity. In all cases, however, the critical nexus is discourse, language as a social activity, both embodying old relationships and offering at times the possibilities of transformation.

Rather than trying to encompass the entire range of issues within linguistic anthropology, in this volume we have selected four general and intersecting topics as the organizational framework. We believe that these four clearly heuristic topics speak in useful ways to each other and intersect with other fields, for example, psychology, gender and feminist studies, literature and folklore, political theory, and sociocultural anthropology more generally. They provide a range of methodological models for students to consider and, perhaps, employ and help them to triangulate toward a better understanding of the interaction of language, culture, and social practice at the heart of linguistic anthropology as a field. We have not excerpted sections from the chapters, so that readers can have the chance to understand and evaluate the authors' strategies, arguments, and empirical data as fully as possible.

The first topical cluster deals with language socialization and the broader questions of social and cultural knowledge: How is learning language (and that cluster

of local theories and social practices with which it is entangled) linked to becoming a member of a community? Given that children are innately endowed with a language acquisition capacity, what role do caregivers play in their language development? Is it possible that some forms of early language socialization are maladapted for the roles speakers will be asked to play in later life?

The second topical cluster has to do with issues of gender and language. Central to these pieces is an ongoing debate about the relationship between culture and power in explaining differences between men's and women's speech in various societies. The chapters in this part reflect a range of theoretical and methodological perspectives. One of our broader goals in Part Two is to help students engage in principled ways with contentious issues and to suggest some methods through which they can explore and add to the discussion. There are also enough cautionary examples in the published literature to discourage premature interpretive claims.

The third part, dealing with genre, style, and performance, draws primarily upon work in the ethnography of speaking. Central questions here focus on the role of verbal art and performance, including such critical genres as narrative, joking, and humor. The chapters illustrate the usefulness and complexity of understanding situated language through a genre-based approach. This part also raises methodological questions for social science more generally.

Finally, the fourth topic focuses on the relationship between language and social and political life. Several of the chapters deal with language and power in face-to-face communities, viewing language as both reflective of and active in constituting political relationships. The other chapters are concerned with the broader political economy of language, treating such issues as the economic implications of verbal skill, linguistic ideology, and code-switching as a nexus of identity and consciousness. Part Four comes closest to a classic focus of language and culture studies—the relationship between language and thought. These studies, however, locate such connections in the flow of everyday social life and interaction, and not in a more abstract and decontextualized notion of cognition.

It is our hope that those who use this reader will approach the chapters and the topics with a constructively critical frame of mind. There is much to be learned from these studies in terms of both the assumptions and methodologies employed and also from the conclusions of the investigations. But the study of language as a dynamic, contextualized social phenomenon is still in its infancy. There is much work to be done, but with help of pioneers like the scholars represented in this collection, anyone can take up the challenge set out by Edward Sapir sixty-six years ago: "Language is primarily a cultural or social product and must be understood as such. . . . It is peculiarly important that linguists, who are often accused, and accused justly, of failure to look beyond the pretty patterns of their subject matter, should become aware of what their science may mean for the interpretation of human conduct in general." (1929:214)

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# Part One
## *Learning Language,*
## *Learning Culture*

"Ethnocentrism is that state of mind in which the ways of one's own group seem natural and right for all human beings everywhere" (Brown and Lenneberg 1954:454). Nowhere is this more true than in the study of language development. Since the 1960s the study of how children develop the communication skills that distinguish human beings from other creatures has been a growth industry in the United States. The classic work is Roger Brown's study of three children in Cambridge, Massachusetts (Brown 1973). Through examining samples of speech from the children at regular intervals Brown was able to document their progress in developing certain skills in the use of language. Brown was influenced by the views of Noam Chomsky (1965) and consequently concentrated on the children's mastery of certain linguistic structures. There was no attempt to study the circumstances in which the children were developing these skills.

One linguistic anthropologist, Martha Ward, set out to explore the "real-life conditions under which children learn their language" (Ward 1971:2). She chose a plantation settlement, called Rosepoint in the study, west of New Orleans on the Mississippi River, with a predominantly English-speaking population. She found that the methodology that had proved so fruitful for Brown at Harvard was useless in Rosepoint:

> For the first two months of this project attempts to elicit spontaneous speech from the children met with defeat, with or without the tape recorder. The readiness to show off, the constant flow of speech, and the mother-child interaction so common in middle-class children were nowhere in evidence. The children appeared to speak as little to their parents as to the investigator. One twenty-eight-month male spoke three words in as many months. Meanwhile, the mothers complained that the verbal precocity of their children was driving them up the wall. (Ward 1971:15)

Despite this apparently unfavorable situation and the apparent contradiction between mothers' reports and Ward's own formal observations, the children succeeded in developing linguistic skills.

Shirley Brice Heath had the time in which to undertake a more extended ethnographic study in the Piedmont Carolinas communities she discusses. Heath devoted nine years to this study, which is fully reported in Heath 1983. Heath con-

trasts the language socialization of children in three communities: Maintown, a mainstream middle-class community, Roadville, a blue-collar white community, and Trackton, a poorer, working-class black community. Heath makes it quite clear that each of the three communities provides a locally appropriate and effective form of language socialization for their children—until the children enter the school system. Then it becomes clear that the Maintown children have a distinct advantage because their socialization has prepared them for the culture of the school. In interestingly different ways the children of Roadville and Trackton are less well-prepared for the situation they will encounter at school. Unfortunately, the teachers are equally less well-prepared to deal with the children from Roadville and Trackton. In her full-length account (1983:284–287) Heath describes how a dedicated and imaginative teacher succeeded with a group of black first-grade children who were deemed "potential failures" on the basis of their performance on reading readiness tests. But the success was short-lived because the children went on to "regular" classes in which the self-fulfilling prophecies of failure proved yet again to be justified. It is a further justification for Basil Bernstein's warning that we need to rethink the schools as if the middle-class child did not exist (Bernstein 1961:306).

Heath's chapter in the present volume draws attention to the kinds of activities that are taken as "normal" in mainstream U.S. middle-class families. She asks how the middle-class child is socialized into the analytical, field-independent learning style that is frequently presented as that which correlates with academic achievement and success in school. Manuel Ramírez and Alfredo Castañeda (1974) suggest that an important factor is a match between the teaching style of the teacher and the learning style of the child. They also draw attention to the mainstream bias in the use of the terms *field independent* and *field dependent*. They point out that the bias would be reversed if the term for field dependent were *field sensitive* and its contrary *field insensitive*. It is, of course, those who have been successful academically who chose the label field independent for their own learning style. Katherine Nelson (1973) draws attention to a similar possibility of match or mismatch between the very young child's learning style and the mother's expectations and practice. It is a cautionary reminder that not all differences of this kind can be related to social or cultural categories since Nelson's families were all mainstream middle-class white U.S. Americans.

One of the ironies that future historians will note is that Chomsky and his disciples have in theory emphasized the universal aspects of language acquisition but in practice they have tended to base their views on how middle-class U.S. Americans socialize their children. Heath shows the difference in the socialization of the children in Maintown, Roadville, and Trackton. Where the Maintown children are encouraged to be curious about the world around them, the Roadville children are expected to see the world very clearly in terms of true versus false, right versus wrong, and the Trackton children are rewarded for being entertaining, imaginative, and socially adept.

Steven Feld and Bambi Schieffelin describe a different kind of socialization among the Kaluli in Papua New Guinea. The Kaluli emphasize the need for the child to learn to use language for practical reasons, *to halaido,* "hard words." Kaluli adults train their children to do this by telling the child exactly what to say in a particular situation. Word play is considered "bird talk" and discouraged. The Kaluli adults place great importance on correct behavior and early language instruction is intended to reinforce this behavior. The four approaches to language socialization described in these two chapters are interesting for their similarities and differences:

1. In Maintown and Roadville and among the Kaluli the adults are very concerned about their children's language development and intervene to guide it in the right direction. Trackton adults assume that the children will learn from observation and example; they do not provide explicit instruction.
2. The Maintown and Roadville children are brought up in the relative isolation of single-family homes. The Trackton and Kaluli children spend most of their time in a wider social context, which includes adults who are not part of their immediate family.
3. Maintown and Roadville adults interpret very young children's unclear utterances. Trackton and Kaluli adults ignore or discourage such utterances.
4. Roadville and Kaluli adults give specific instructions to children on what to say in particular situations. Maintown adults are more likely to try to elicit the appropriate form from the child. Trackton adults are less concerned about encouraging language development.
5. Maintown and Trackton adults encourage their children to use language imaginatively and creatively. Roadville and Kaluli adults explicitly discourage this.
6. In all four communities the adults pay more attention to what the children are doing with language than to linguistic form.

These two chapters provide a window into the circumstances in which children develop linguistic skills. Chomsky has claimed that children are genetically endowed with a language acquisition device that enables them to develop these skills in a predictable manner regardless of the efforts of the adults around them. One of the questions that these chapters raise is: Do they support or refute Chomsky's view?

Language development does not cease at the age of three or four. In their chapter, Elinor Ochs, Ruth Smith, and Carolyn Taylor show how family members solve problems by discussing them in a narrative framework. Most accounts of narratives deal with the structure of narratives told by a single speaker (Bauman 1986; Johnstone 1990; Labov and Waletzky 1967; Labov 1981). Ochs et al., however, are concerned with co-narration in which the "story" is socially negotiated by the participants. They show how a story that starts out in one direction can end up with

a rather different conclusion because of the contribution of other participants. The question of who is "entitled" to tell a particular story (Shuman 1986) thus becomes negotiable. In this chapter, Ochs et al. take the analysis of speech events (Hymes 1974) to a more refined level than Heath or Feld and Schieffelin do in theirs. Whereas the latter deal with "types" of interaction, Ochs et al. deal with two specific examples. As in all empirical work, there is a trade-off. Ochs et al. provide details of a kind that are glossed over in the other chapters, but they provide no comparative data. We do not know how typical their examples are or whether there are differences in family style that can be related to social categories.

## Suggestions for Further Reading

The articles in *The Development of Language,* edited by J. B. Gleason, give a good overview of research in the area of children's language acquisition. C. Snow and C. Ferguson (eds.), *Talking to Children,* R. Scollon's *Conversations with a One-year-Old,* and L. Bloom, *The Transition from Infancy to Language* give good accounts of children's early language development. Chomsky's *Knowledge of Language* provides a comprehensive introduction to his views; see also his *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax.* Two other books that deal with children's early syntactic development are L. Bloom, *Language Development* and M. Bowerman, *Early Syntactic Development.* Children's later syntactic development is discussed in C. Chomsky, *Acquisition of Syntax from 5 to 10* and in S. Romaine, *The Language of Children and Adolescents.* D. Slobin (ed.), *A Cross-cultural Study of Language Acquisition,* provides a wide range of information on children learning languages other than English. E. Ochs's *Culture and Language Development: Language Acquisition and Language Socialization in a Samoan Village* and B. Schieffelin, *The Give and Take of Everyday Life: Language Socialization of Kaluli Children* give insightful accounts of language development in non-English-speaking communities.

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