Language, culture, and society
key topics in linguistic anthropology

[edited by]

Christine Jourdan, Kevin Tuite.

LANGUAGE, CULTURE, AND SOCIETY

KEY TOPICS IN LINGUISTIC ANTHROPOLOGY

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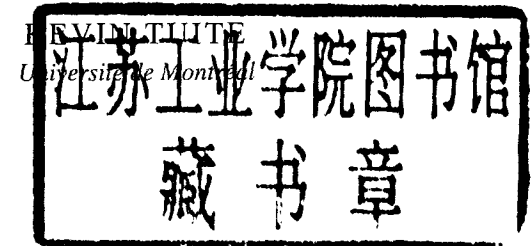
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In memory of Roger M. Keesing, a *passe-muraille*
of the best kind.

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INTRODUCTION:
WALKING THROUGH WALLS

CHRISTINE JOURDAN AND KEVIN TUITE

In an interview recorded in 1994, André-Georges Haudricourt described himself as a "passe-muraille," a person capable of walking through walls (Bertrand 2002: 251). The *passe-muraille*, best known to French readers from the short story of that name by Marcel Aymé, is both marvelous and disquieting, a transgressive being – in both senses of the word – who refuses to acknowledge the barriers that contain and channel the movements of others. Haudricourt clearly had this complex of senses in mind when he chose the word to characterize his atypical career in French academia: an agronomy graduate who subsequently studied under Marcel Mauss, Haudricourt went on to conduct important research in such diverse fields as ethnoscience, phonological theory and the history of agriculture, often to the discomfiture of his more sessile colleagues.

For much of the past century, to say nothing of the present one, there has been a great deal of talk about the desirability of interdisciplinarity, and of breaking down the walls that impede communication between adjoining academic fields. The discipline of anthropology, as conceived (and exemplified) by Franz Boas, was to be just such a wall-less meeting place, where ethnologists, archaeologists, linguists, and physical anthropologists would collaboratively grapple with the complexities of human diversity (see, e.g. Boas 1899). Boas's vision took institutional form as the "four-field" or "Boasian" anthropology departments of many North American universities, where course offerings, faculty recruitment, and even the composition of internal committees conform to the principle of an asymmetrical confederation of canton-like subdisciplines, with social-cultural anthropology as the *primus inter pares*. Admirable as this Boasian plan might have been at the time of its conception, it has been increasingly subject to criticism and attempts at reconfiguration. Johannes Fabian (1993: 53) – himself a notorious *passe-muraille* – questioned the continued relevance of "that decisively modernist conception of a 'four-fields approach'" in the contemporary intellectual landscape of reflexive anthropology, cultural studies, postprocessual archaeology, the various recent developments in human genetics, creole studies and sociolinguistics. To this list one might add the troublesome fault line running between "scientific" and "critical" stances within the discipline. It is a telling sign of the times that when the anthropologists at Stanford University split into separate "Anthropological Sciences" and "Cultural and

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Social Anthropology" departments, the new wall cut across three of the four Boasian fields.

Where something akin to the Boasian configuration is maintained, one detects evidence of "the contemporary marginalization of linguistic anthropology" in North American academia (Darnell, this volume). Many leading anthropology departments now recognize only three subdisciplines, with linguistic anthropology either blended into a combined "socio-cultural and linguistic" section (e.g. NYU), or relegated to institutional invisibility (e.g. Columbia, Harvard).

Depending on the venue and the time, linguistic anthropologists have a room of their own, bunk with the ethnologists, are split apart by new departmental configurations, or fade into the background of institutionally unrecognized specializations like kinship or political economy. Nonetheless, the history of anthropology, and especially of North American anthropology, is to a significant degree marked by its relations with linguistics. As Keesing (1992) noted, the relationship has not always been a tranquil one. It has been a *pas-de-deux* where the partners approach, then separate, then approach again as the internal dynamics of each discipline shift, and as research focus oscillates between particularism and universalism, culturalism and mentalism. The relationship has at times fostered the sharing of models and exchanging of paradigms, the rejecting or borrowing of concepts, all of which has been beneficial to both disciplines: consider such offspring of crossbreeding as ethnoscience and ethnosemantics, structuralism, and more recently, cognitive anthropology, the dialogic principle and cultural creolization. Even if some of these approaches have not been as productive as had been hoped, and even if some have been the targets of intense criticism (ethnoscience and structuralism, for example), they have informed the anthropological practice of generations of researchers, and therefore, have become part of the history of the field.

This book has its roots in a special issue of the Québec journal *Anthropologie et sociétés*, published in 1999. The two editors, Christine Jourdan and Claire Lefebvre, were commissioned to assemble an "état des lieux" of ethnolinguistics, a term – more common in French usage than in English – for the study of the embeddedness of language in social and cultural life, in "ways of being." "État des lieux" is routinely translated "state of the art," but in fact the French and English phrases have very different connotational fields. "State of the art," especially when used as an adjective, brings up images of cutting-edge, top-end technology (audio equipment, for example), with all of the attendant bells and whistles. "État des lieux," which has a second sense referring to the inventory of rented property done at the beginning and end of a lease, evokes the far humbler scene of a landlord inspecting chipped paint and carpet stains. These contrasting perspectives are in fact well represented in the current discourses of linguistic anthropology – the high-theoretical, terminologically daunting writings of the semiotic functionalists, on the one hand, the repeated handwringing over the peripheral status of the field, on the other – but in the end, we decided

to go with neither orientation for the expanded English-language version of the *Anthropologie et sociétés* collection. The width of focus varies considerably from one chapter to the next, as do the historical depth, manner of presentation (or argumentation), and comprehensiveness of coverage. Summaries of past accomplishments and present debates are juxtaposed to forward-looking proposals, and even the surveying of new terrain to explore.

Like the self-described "vagabond" Haudricourt, many of the authors contributing to our collection followed atypical pathways across academic fields or indeed outside of them. The two senior authors in this volume are particularly dramatic exemplars of the *passe-muraille* profile. Alongside their multidisciplinary careers within the university, Paul Friedrich has published volumes of poetry, and Charles Taylor has been an active participant in Canadian politics. (In 1965 he ran – unsuccessfully – for a parliament seat against Pierre Trudeau.) It may be difficult – and is almost certainly beside the point – to specify in what manner Friedrich's activity as a poet has been reflected in his varied work as an anthropologist and linguist, or to what degree Taylor's hands-on involvement in debates over multiculturalism or the future of Québec has colored his sensitivity to the interdependance of language and ways of being. The same could be said, *mutatis mutandis*, of each of the *passe-muraille* represented in this book. It is not the point of this collection either to explain each contributor's research in terms of his or her education, career trajectory or interests, nor to carve the field of linguistic anthropology, or ethnolinguistics, into the set of subjects treated in the collection.

The ethnolinguistic perspective

Europe, 1937. Nazi Germany rearms, "enemies of the people" die before Soviet firing squads, the Luftwaffe tests its weapons on the Basque city of Guernica. Aldous Huxley watches two cats preparing to fight:

balefully the eyes glare; from far down in the throat of each come bursts of a strange, strangled noise of defiance . . . Another moment and surely there must be an explosion. But no; all of a sudden one of the two creatures turns away, hoists a hind leg in a more than fascist salute and, with the same fixed and focused attention as it had given a moment before to its enemy, begins to make a lingual toilet . . . Such as it is, the consistency of human characters is due to the words upon which all human experiences are strung. We are purposeful because we can describe our feelings in rememberable words, can justify and rationalize our desires in terms of some kind of argument. Faced by an enemy, we do not allow an itch to distract us from our emotions: the mere word "enemy" is enough to keep us reminded of our hatred, to convince us that we do well to be angry.

(Huxley 1937: 84)

Erudite as he was, Huxley may well have had Herder in mind when he penned this passage, although he did not refer to him, or any other eighteenth-century

thinker for that matter, in his essay. What was clear to him is the fundamental difference between the wordless, reactive living-in-the-present of animals, and the thought world of language-using humanity. As Charles Taylor shows in his revisiting of Herder's critique of Condillac, the former's "constitutive" (or constitutive-expressive) theory of language is a necessary preliminary to an appreciation of how "language transforms our world," endowing all that surrounds us with meaning, enabling us – through expressive language, and also the nonverbal codes of gesture, stance and dress – to create new "ways of being" in the world, with their associated sets of values.

Although this insight into the intimate relation between language and what we understand as the essence of humanness goes back two centuries, there have been repeated moves in the subsequent history of linguistics to represent language as an object of study in isolation from its users and situations of use. Advances in historical-comparative linguistics, especially with regard to phonetics, contributed to mid nineteenth-century Neo-grammarian models of mechanical, "exceptionless" sound laws "decontextualized from their circumstances of use and any link to their users" (Tuite, this volume). To this narrow-scope, natural-scientific approach to the reconstruction and explanation of language change, Hugo Schuchardt opposed a wider-scope historical method which drew upon ethnographic and sociological data, information on naming practices and the expressive use of language, as well as the findings of historical phonetics and semantics. In the early years of the twentieth century, Ferdinand de Saussure, a historical linguist who studied under the leading Neo-grammarians at Leipzig, proposed his celebrated contrast between *parole* and *langue*, "a rigorous methodological distinction between language seen as the constantly changing speech habits of a community and language as a *system*, a virtual structure extracted from time and from the minds of its speakers" (Tuite, this volume). The Saussurean project of studying the virtual structures underlying linguistic competence has been carried forth most notably by the various schools of formalist grammar, whose models of language are characteristically situated in what two linguists recently dubbed "Chomskiania, the land of idealized speaker-hearers," these being a "uniform population modelled by a single solipsist speaking to himself" (Pierrehumbert and Gross 2003).

In view of the dominance of what are often – and perhaps inaccurately – called Saussurean models in the field of linguistics, the ethnolinguistic perspective could be characterized as the refusal to decontextualize language. Such a description, however, gives the false impression that linguistic anthropology is a reactionary movement, with goals defined in opposition to the methodology of whatever happens to be the leading paradigm in formalist linguistics. Some of the authors represented here do, it is true, contrast purely language-centered explanations to those which make reference to speakers as social agents, the internal dynamics of speech communities, and the situated use of language (Heller on bilingualism and codeswitching, Jourdan on creolization, Ochs and

Schieffelin on the acquisition of grammatical competence). Nevertheless, we wish to point out to any linguists who might be reading this that the ethnolinguistic perspective is not to be equated with what is commonly called "functionalism," that is, attempts to supplant all or part of formalist theories of innate, specialized linguistic competence with explanations that invoke more generalized cognitive capacities, or design exigencies related to the various uses to which language is put. Much work by linguistic anthropologists is compatible with – or, in any case, does not contradict – the putative existence of an innate language organ and dedicated mental modules (Chomsky 1980; Fodor 1983). Like ethnology, linguistic anthropology is a hermeneutical enterprise; in William Foley's words, "it is an interpretive discipline peeling away at language to find cultural understandings" (1997: 3). Ethnolinguistic inquiries tend to cluster around two grand approaches to the relation between culture and language, which had long been regarded as mutually exclusive: language depends on culture; language organizes culture. Although contemporary researchers no longer attach the same significance to this formal distinction, it is nonetheless at the basis of the division between the research methods of linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics, narrowly defined: cultural interpretation on the one hand, linguistic markers and social correlates, on the other. If linguistic anthropologists observe language with a wide-angle lens, they do not always focus on the same field of view, nor from the same standpoint. In this collection, the following themes – and probably others as well – can be adduced as points of convergence, drawing the attention of more than one author, and sometimes being subjected to quite different treatment by each: linguistic relativity, expressivity and verbal art, language socialization, translation and hermeneutics, language contact, and variation and change.

Linguistic relativity

On hearing the term "linguistic anthropology," the first thing that comes to many readers' minds is the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis, generally understood as the principle that language conditions habits of speech which in turn organize and generate particular patterns of thought. But linguistic anthropology has likewise a contribution to make to the debate between particularism and universalism, which is once again a subject of interest in many sectors of American anthropology. One sign of this renewal of attention is the return to the classic works of authors linked to particularism, notably Edward Sapir (for example, Darnell 1990 and Sapir 1994; also Lucy's [1992a] important re-reading of the foundational texts on linguistic relativity). It is true that the linguistic relativity hypothesis has played a central role in the history of North American linguistic anthropology, in that the deep, organic relation that it postulates between language and culture is of central relevance to debates on the nature of the mutual determination of language, mental representations, and social action.

John Leavitt situates the linguistic relativity concept in an intellectual history going back to Herder and Humboldt, and forward to our own times. He delineates two grand perspectives on human nature, the one universalist, seeking natural-scientific laws to account for the important features of cognition; the other pluralistic and essentialist, inspired by Romanticism and the human sciences, according to which each language (and culture) has its own essence and "indwelling principle that cannot be classified into any general category, any more than a human being or a human face" (W. v. Humboldt "Von dem grammatischen Baue der Sprachen", translated by Leavitt). Within linguistics, the natural-scientific stream came to the foreground in the Neo-grammarian doctrine of sound laws, and continued on to Chomsky and generative grammar. The other, Humboldtian, stream is less well known to anglophone readers, but, as Leavitt demonstrates, it represents a highly significant component of the intellectual backgrounds of Franz Boas and Edward Sapir.

Boas received his early training in physics, then moved into the fields of psychophysics and geography. According to Leavitt, he began his intellectual activity "right on the cusp of th[e] antinomy" between the natural and human sciences. Unlike most of his predecessors on both sides of the divide, however, Boas "rejected the evolutionist package on every level," as well as "any ranking of languages and cultures according to a fixed standard." This led to accusations, from neo-evolutionists in particular, that Boas's "radical empiricism" and emphasis on individual difference made him irreconcilably hostile to sociological and anthropological theorizing (Wax 1956). Leavitt draws an original and useful parallel between Boas's ethnology and Marx's critique of political economy; with regard to the rejection of evolutionism, one might also juxtapose Boas and the German linguist A. F. Pott, the founder of modern etymological practice. The etymological study of word histories can be conceived as being, in microcosm, an enterprise comparable to the investigation of culture, insofar as etymologists operate at the interface of the law-like regularities of historical phonetics and analogical change, on the one hand, and the messiness of history, social networks and human creativity, on the other. Sitting, like Boas, astride the divide between the *Natur-* and *Geisteswissenschaften*, Pott likewise inveighed against those who applied natural-scientific models in a heavy-handed and simplistic way, especially when such theories were informed by unexamined Eurocentrism (Pott 1856).

Despite the difficulties of operating "within a pre-existing discursive field massively oriented either to universalism or to essentialism," Boas, Sapir, and Whorf developed a means of conceptualizing the relation between language and (habitual) thought that was "pluralist but not essentialist," in that linguistic relativity – like Einstein's celebrated theory in physics – does not privilege any single point of view, nor any fixed standard (such as Indo-European had been taken to be) for assessing the adequacy of human languages.

In her contribution to the present volume, Regna Darnell presents the career of Benjamin Lee Whorf, and the role he played in pre-war American linguistic anthropology. An atypical and original character in an academic landscape succumbing to the economic downturn of the Great Depression, Whorf drew the remarkable observations that guided his thinking about the relation between language structure and habitual thought as much from his professional experience as a fire-insurance investigator as from the study of "exotic" societies. Darnell offers the intriguing hypothesis that Whorf's celebrated formulation of linguistic relativity may have not been so much "a new theory or methodology but a pedagogical effort to translate the linguistic work of Sapir and his students so that it would be comprehensible to non-linguists." Whorf died young, before he could give his intuitions the extended treatment that they required. Nonetheless, his work has drawn enormous attention, and criticism, since his death. It is clear that many interpretations and utilizations of the "Whorfian hypothesis" go well beyond anything Whorf himself appeared to have intended. Darnell warns her readers against simplistic readings of Whorf, which present his hypothesis as holding that linguistic categories mechanistically constrain thought. She limpidly delineates the differences between the approach of Boas and that of Sapir. This section of her chapter is important for what it reveals of the foundations of the Americanist tradition of linguistic anthropology, which will eventually steer it in the direction of culturalist and cognitivist frameworks: phonemic models, theories of mind, the ontological relation between language and culture.

Cognitive anthropology, earlier known under the labels "new ethnography," "semantic ethnography" or "ethnoscience," coalesced toward the end of the 1950s in the context of a movement in linguistic anthropology seeking to revise the notion of culture then favored by ethnographers. The new movement insisted on methodological rigor and the necessity of identifying fundamental cultural categories. As explained by Penelope Brown in her contribution to this volume, the notion of culture, until then primarily derived from the study of "behavior or artifacts," should be replaced by one which foregrounds the role of systems of knowledge and mental dispositions. Brown summarizes the forty-year history of cognitive anthropology's examination of the relation between language (and other semiotic systems) and thought, the role of language in organizing knowledge, etc. These questions have been at the center of vigorous debates between "(i) those who emphasize universals of human cognition vs. those who stress the importance of cultural differences, and (ii) those who treat cognition as 'in the head' vs. others who insist on its embodied, interactional, and contextually dependent nature." The first part of the chapter presents an overview of the initial approaches and goals of cognitive anthropology through the 1970s. The second part is concerned with the North American tradition of research on cultural models. The third section presents some new approaches to the issue of linguistic relativity, especially those which focus on spatial language and

cognition. The author concludes by looking toward the future of the program of cognitive anthropology, suggesting some areas where fruitful research might be undertaken.

The article contributed by Paul Kay is in response to the debates provoked by the hypotheses presented in Berlin and Kay (1969) on the typology of the basic color terms of the world's languages. Their conclusions appeared to contradict standard interpretations of the Whorfian hypothesis. They imply, first of all, that a set of no more than eleven perceptual categories can account for the referential range of the basic color terms of any human language. Secondly, more elaborate color term systems evolve from less elaborate ones in a partially fixed order. In his chapter in the present volume, Kay responds to three objections raised by John Lucy, Anna Wierzbicka and others: (1) In many (perhaps all) languages, lexemes used to denote chromatic features also denote non-color properties, such as ripeness or succulence; (2) The basic color lexemes of many languages do not constitute a distinct formal class, in terms of morphology or syntactic properties; (3) The findings reported by Berlin and Kay (1969), and similar investigations in the "Universals and Evolution" tradition of research, are an artifact of the methodology used by these approaches. Kay presents a vigorous and detailed rebuttal to these criticisms in his paper, drawing upon his more than three decades of research on color terms, as well as the contributions of numerous other scholars who have looked at this lexical subsystem in various languages.

While much of the research on linguistic relativity has focused on readily delimitable semantic domains such as color, number, and space, the average learner of a foreign language is struck by differences less amenable to psycholinguistic testing: the expressive potential of the new language, the tropes and metaphors preferred by its speakers, the distinctive forms of verbal art and conversational genres. Edward Sapir – a "minor poet and a major phonologist," in Paul Friedrich's characterization – once wrote that "the understanding of a simple poem . . . involves not merely an understanding of the single words . . . but a full comprehension of the whole life of the community as it is mirrored in the words, or as it is suggested by their overtones" (Sapir 1929a [1949]: 162). Language is, by its very nature, a competence shared by a community; a phonology, grammar and lexicon structured in ways that are comparable to, but different from, those of other languages; an expressive and constitutive medium through which "we present, enact, and thus make possible our way of being in the world and to others" (Taylor, this volume). According to Jakobson's (1960) communication-theoretic model, the poetic function of speech is oriented toward the message itself, the linguistic form *as* form. Dry and technical it may be, but Jakobson's definition can be extraordinarily fruitful if one uses it, as Friedrich does, as a standpoint for viewing the multiple interactions and relations among language, the social group, and the individual. The ethnopoetic project has as its goal, one might say, the working out of the manifold

implications of "form about form" for both individual creativity, and what Friedrich calls "linguaculture," a neologism intended to capture the fundamental fact that "culture is a part of language just as language is a part of culture" (Friedrich: 219). Among the facets of ethnopoetics explored in this chapter are: (1) the aesthetic and expressive potential of language structure (phonetics, morphology, etc.); (2) the dilemma of universalism and linguacultural situatedness; (3) the inevitability, yet impossibility, of translation; (4) the poetics of "non-poetic" texts. In his concluding sections, Friedrich reflects on the possibility of reconciling philosophical and poetic conceptions of truthfulness, and the political nature of poetic texts.

Language contact

The phenomena that are described by the term *contact* in anthropology and in linguistic anthropology have challenged conceptions of culture and language as whole, bounded and organic entities. At the core of that challenge lie two issues: first, how to understand the processes of contact itself with regard to such a reified understanding of culture; and second, how to analyze the effects of contact-induced change. These two questions have forced anthropologists to engage with the issue of change as an inherent part of culture and language, and thus to apprehend social and linguistic realities in terms of processes and not simply in terms of traits and features. Central to this discourse on change are "otherness" and an understanding of the effects that alterity has on the conception of self, on group identity, and on cultural positioning. Interpretation of the other is the key feature of the contact situation. Permanent exposure to "otherness" through contact with neighboring groups may lead to various linguistic practices that have been described in the literature in terms of interference, interlanguage, bilingualism, multilingualism, language shift, language crossing, obsolescence, pidginization, and creolization. In some cases, sustained contact has led to an exacerbated sense of group identity that may be symbolized through the enhancement of linguistic differences (as in the Amazon basin or Melanesia). Anthropologists interested in contact-induced cultural change have focused on cultural borrowing, diffusion, reinterpretation, syncretism, translation, and acculturation; but also on biculturalism and multiculturalism and, more recently, on cultural creolization and on the effect of globalization on local cultures. Some forms of contact, such as colonization and forced displacements of population, are extreme types that, through imposition of new ideologies and modes of life, have severely altered, and often destroyed, the pre-existing balance of power among neighboring groups. They have often brought about the birth of new languages (such as pidgins and creoles), but also the death or attrition of others. Under colonization, or any other form of hegemonic conditions, the cultural anchoring of languages is challenged and often shattered, compelling individuals and groups to adopt the language spoken by the dominant power,

or whatever language that will allow them to survive socially. In most cases, the question of choice is irrelevant.

In this volume, two chapters address some of the linguistic effects of cultural contact: Jourdan presents an analysis of the genesis of pidgin and creole (PC) languages, while Heller discusses bilingualism with regard to linguistic and cultural theory.

Jourdan tackles the question of PC genesis from the angle of culture, power and meaning. Convinced as she is that the birth of new languages cannot be dissociated from the social condition of their genesis, and that the impetus for PC genesis is found in the lived experience of their makers, she seeks to identify the cultural components of this experience that have led to, and shaped, the development of these new languages. Considering primarily those pidgins that have evolved in plantation societies of the Atlantic and Pacific, and starting with the concept of culture, Jourdan revisits the conditions prevalent in these social worlds. A discussion of the social organization of the plantations and of the work practice on plantations, as well as of practices of cultural retention on the part of the workers, leads her to propose that *work*, and work-related activities, have been among the main loci of pidgin genesis. Special consideration of the power relationships that were characteristic of plantation societies allows her to shed light on the conflictual and consensual relationships that have made pidgins possible. She further suggests that in situations of liminality or cultural alienation, the birth of a new language may be constitutive of a form of resistance against hegemony. She concludes that, given human agency and the social conditions that served as their matrix, the birth of pidgins and creoles was inevitable.

One outcome of sustained contact between ethnocultural groups has been bilingualism or multilingualism, a phenomenon that has been often portrayed as a pragmatic response to local sociolinguistic realities. In her chapter, Monica Heller moves away from such a functionalist approach to bilingualism, and instead examines it from the points of view of linguistic theory, the demands of the nation-state and the political economy of culture. Her own research on codeswitching demonstrates the challenges it poses to core tenets of linguistic theory. Whether it is considered from the perspective of universal grammar, or from an interactionist theory of language, codeswitching challenges the conception of language as an autonomous system. She asks: "What if grammar were the order speakers impose, more or less successfully, on their linguistic resources?" But bilingualism also challenges directly the organicity of the nation-state conceived as the bounded collective space where the unity of language and ethnicity takes place, a representation which has driven many a language-policy reform. More interestingly, bilingualism is seen as a resource deployed by speakers in making meaning, and on this basis Heller calls for a reassessment of traditional tenets in linguistic anthropology concerning language, identity and culture. In her view, language is best seen as a complex

and fuzzy social construct, that is not evenly distributed socially, and which is associated by speakers with disparate goals, values and intentions, in the course of social practice. Bilingualism can be conceptualized as a set of ideologically loaded resources through which speakers, as social actors, not only replicate existing conventions and relations, but also create new ones.

Language socialization

Sentences such as "I declare the meeting adjourned," or "I bet you $50 the Cubs will win the World Series before the end of the century" are known to philosophers as performatives, in that the speaker performs the act of adjourning a meeting or making a bet by the very fact of having uttered these words. As analyzed by Austin (1975), performatives conventionally presuppose the conditions for their successful performance, and have conventional entailments, i.e. their successful performance brings about a specific state of affairs. Anyone can *say* "I declare the meeting adjourned," but the utterance will only be efficacious if there is in fact a meeting going on, the speaker has the floor, he or she has been invested with the authority of chairperson, and so forth. The importance of Austin's analysis for anthropologists is that it can in principle be extended to *any* utterance. Silverstein (1976) has combined the notion of performativity with Peircian semiotics (the concept of indexicality, in particular), to create a powerful tool for investigating the context-dependence of speech. Even a blandly routine "Nice day, isn't it?", said to a neighbor one passes on the sidewalk, is laden with indices pertaining to the social identity of the speaker (variables of pronunciation or form correlated with sex, age, social class, ethnicity, etc.), that of the interlocutor (casual or formal style, mode of address), and the nature of the interaction (phatic communion, rather than an earnest request for meteorological data). Each element of the phrase presupposes an appropriate context, if only on the grammatical level, and entails certain consequences for subsequent talk. On-going speech can be imagined as a point of intersubjective focus moving forward in time, surrounded by more or less shadowy concentric circles of presupposable knowledge, from the most immediate, local and ephemeral, to the most general, durable and "cultural."

Best known to anthropologists for their research on language socialization, Elinor Ochs and Bambi Schieffelin have also made important contributions to linguistics and to the study of child language acquisition. Psycholinguists have long known that children achieve grammatical mastery of their native languages at about the same age, regardless of the structure of the language, the degree of explicit training they receive from their care-givers, or the use of simplified registers such as mainstream North American "motherese." But children are not just maturing language organs acquiring the principles and parameters of the target language. They are also becoming competent social actors and interactants, learning not only what to say, but when and to whom to say it. In other

words, children are picking up the indexical associations, the presuppositions and entailments of language forms – their performative component – along with their grammatical structure. In this paper, an updated version of one written a decade ago for the *Handbook of child language* (Ochs and Schieffelin 1995), Ochs and Schieffelin, drawing on their long-term ethnographic studies of language acquisition in Samoa and highland New Guinea, demonstrate the degree to which "children's use and understanding of grammatical forms is culturally reflexive – tied in manifold ways to local views of how to think, feel, know, (inter)act, or otherwise project a social persona or construct a relationship." Based on their fieldwork, they show that children readily acquire age-, status- and gender-appropriate forms that are rarely used by the adults around them, while not employing more frequently heard grammatical constructions that are not deemed appropriate for children. "Even very young children," they conclude, "appear to be sensitive to the ways in which grammatical constructions within a code index social identity," as demonstrated by their selection of linguistic forms that, in accordance with communal norms that often operate below the level of conscious awareness, signal – and construct – their identity as children, as members of a kingroup, as male or female.

Elizabeth Povinelli's contribution builds upon Ochs and Schieffelin's work on language socialization, despite the impression the reader might get from the opening scene, set in the Australian outback over a century ago. Two European men and a group of Arrente speakers are portrayed engaging in a cross-language encounter reminiscent of the late W. V. Quine's well-known parable on the inscrutability of reference (Quine 1969). The two parties attempt to bridge the radically different conceptual and cultural arrays that have been brought into momentary contact by the European's finger pointing to "that" field-of-action, which he understands as "sex," explained as necessary to keep the head decorations from coming loose during a corroboree. The anthropologist who points to a passing rabbit, and the native who says "gavagai" are presented by Quine as engaged in a simple act of reference and predication.

The scene reconstructed by Povinelli is far less innocent. The Arrentes, forced from their land and hunted like animals, offer ethnographic data in exchange for food and protection. In this highly asymmetric context of communication, the bridge opened by Spencer and Gillen's extended fingers and sketches in the sand is not destined for an equitable two-way flow of information. The utterances and performances of the Arrentes supply the ethnographers with comparative data, and perhaps a few titillating or exotic excerpts to be reframed for mass consumption. As for the Aborigines, the English term "sex," accompanied by its Victorian-era ideological baggage, "slowly rearticulated the total order of indigenous semantic and pragmatic meaning, entextualizing new value-laden references and predications." This story of the impression of meanings and norms onto minds (and bodies) under asymmetric power relations is a jumping-off point for Povinelli's thought-provoking and original exploration of the

emergence of the pre-linguistic subject into the symbolic order. It is at this stage that the child's "intimate grammar" begins to form, as "traumas and corporeal sensations" are laminated onto language along with socially approved (or, in any case, care-giver-approved) norms of speech, behavior and the presentation of self. Some readers may still grit their teeth whenever the name of Lacan is invoked within earshot, but there is no doubt that Povinelli's ambitious attempt to wed key notions from Lacanian psychology to the analytical tools of contemporary anthropology, sociolinguistics, and pragmatics will draw new attention to the crucial, but understudied, developmental phase in early childhood where language, gender identity, and desire emerge.

Translation and hermeneutics

Leaving aside what the Arrentes might have thought about their encounter, the ethnographers Spencer and Gillen probably considered themselves to have been engaged in the work of translation, or rather hermeneutics, the interpretation of difficult, chronologically or culturally distant texts. Habermas (1983: 258) distinguished three major stances among social scientists with regard to the project of interpretation. The first, "hermeneutic objectivism," continues to pin its hopes on what Dilthey called "empathy" (Einfühlung), the sympathetic reading of distant texts undistorted by the reader's own cultural, linguistic and historical situation. In reaction, some philosophers (Richard Rorty, for example) opposed a relativist "radical hermeneuticism" to the naïve, and potentially ethnocentric, traditional approach, accompanied by the renouncing of claims to objectivity and explanatory power. Habermas himself staked out the middle ground, favoring a "hermeneutic reconstructionism" which does not claim absolute neutrality, yet seeks, through a dialogic back-and-forth between the reader's horizon and the distant one of the text, to arrive at "some sort of objective and theoretical knowledge."

The question of the grounding of interpretation across distinct linguacultural horizons, or of its very possibility, lies at the heart of the ethnolinguistic enterprise, indeed, that of anthropology as a whole. The contributors to this volume touch on this matter from their particular standpoints, and the lack of consensus within the confines of these pages is representative of the field at large. Some cognitive scientists and psycholinguists anchor their understanding of hermeneutics in intensional universals: patterns, concepts and categories of thought common to all humanity, presumably as infrastructural features of the mind determined by our common genetic heritage. The very different semantic universalisms of Jerry Fodor and Anna Wierzbicka are extreme cases in point, but it is safe to say that few people nowadays still take radical-empiricist, *tabula rasa* models of mind seriously. Most scholars also assume some measure of extensional universals, these being features not just of the world "out there," but also the much closer-to-home commonalities of the human body, human

life cycles, the expression of emotional states (for example, Paul Ekman's work on facial expressions), etc.

In what was to be his last conference paper, Roger Keesing (1993) accused anthropologists of exaggerating "the gulfs between culturally constructed worlds of thought and experience" in the face of mounting evidence from cognitive science and linguistics, and indeed from the daily experiences of the Kwaios with whom he had lived in the Solomon Islands, as they shuttle back and forth between the mountain shrines of their ancestors, and the shops, schools, and video parlors of the capital, and between their indigenous Austronesian language and Solomons Pidgin and/or English. (A less dramatic, almost reflex-like, shuttling between languages is a daily occurrence here in Montréal, and doubtless many other bilingual or polyglot societies the world over. We have noted from our own experience – and numerous acquaintances have related similar stories – that it is quite possible to recall, in great detail, the content of a conversation one had at lunch, or of a program seen on television, without remembering what language(s) it was in.) Yet however rich, specific and hard-wired the pan-human common ground might be, the differences are there, they are evident to everyone, and they serve as expressive resources, and occasions of adventure and aesthetic appreciation, not just obstacles to perfect understanding. Friedrich asserts that "translation is linguistically and mathematically impossible," yet it has been attempted since the dawn of civilization, and doubtless long before then. Taylor points out the inevitability of "Sapir–Whorf incommensurabilities" across languages and cultures, in social institutions, values, practices and virtues, yet in the same sentence, he avers that they are "the very stuff of life in multicultural, 'globalizing' societies." If Povinelli's hypothesis about intimate grammars is on the mark, minor (and perhaps not-so-minor) incommensurabilities may lurk beneath the surface of face-to-face encounters between two people who, by all appearances, speak the same language and participate in the same culture. Being a *passe-muraille* is a conscious stance for some, a necessity for others, and – to a greater or less degree – part and parcel of everyone's social life, whether or not one realizes it.

Variation and change

Hermeneutics originated as the methodology for interpreting ancient texts, such as the Bible and the Homeric epics. Although many philosophers interested in hermeneutic theory have turned their attention toward the difficulties of interpreting across contemporary social and linguistic divides, new advances in this area can be brought to bear once again on the study of the past. In his chapter, Kevin Tuite considers the consequences of treating historical linguistics – and in particular, its somewhat rarefied subfield of etymology – as a member in full standing of the historical social sciences. Linguists hypothesizing sound changes in the distant past, and etymologists studying word origins,

are practitioners of historical reconstruction and historiography. This being the case, what can historical linguists learn from recent debates on narrativity, the poetics of historical writing or archaeological methodology? In his paper, Tuite looks at recent work on variation and change in language, specifically, that done within the framework of variationist sociolinguistics. It is an inherent characteristic of language, as a shared competence that continually emerges and renews itself through communicative interaction, that it is constantly changing, and that no speech community, nor even the speech repertoire of a single individual, is completely uniform. As Labov and his colleagues have documented, the ubiquity of variation entails a constant source of distinguishing variables which can take on indexical loadings of all sorts. Ethnographic work by sociolinguists has begun to reveal the networks through which new pronunciations spread, and the identity-marking (and identity-making) strategies underlying the deployment of speech variables. Much work remains to be done, and the circumstances surrounding linguistic innovation remain obscure. Can Ochs and Schieffelin's research on language socialization, Friedrich's ethnopoetic inquiry into the creative potential of all speakers (not just poets), or Povinelli's work on the uneasy interface between intimate and social grammars, help us further explore the murky and porous boundary between the communal and the individual? One thing, at least, is certain: it will take a *passe-muraille* . . .

I

AN ISSUE ABOUT LANGUAGE

CHARLES TAYLOR

How to understand language? This is a pre-occupation going back to the very beginning of our intellectual tradition. What is the relation of language to other signs? to signs in general? Are linguistic signs arbitrary or motivated? What is it that signs and words have when they have meaning? These are very old questions. Language is an old topic in Western philosophy, but its importance has grown. It is not a major issue among the ancients. It begins to take on greater importance in the seventeenth century, with Hobbes and Locke. And then in the twentieth century it has become close to obsessional. All major philosophers have their theories of language: Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Davidson, and all manner of "deconstructionists" have made language central to their philosophical reflection.

In what we can call the modern period, from the seventeenth century, there has been a continual debate, with philosophers reacting to and feeding off each other, about the nature of language. I think we can cast light on this debate if we identify two grand types of theory. I will call the first an "enframing" theory. By this I mean that the attempt is made to understand language within the framework of a picture of human life, behaviour, purposes, or mental functioning, which is itself described and defined without reference to language. Language is seen as arising in this framework, which can be variously conceived as we shall see, and fulfilling some function within it, but the framework itself precedes, or at least can be characterized independently of language.

The other type of theory I want to call "constitutive." As this word suggests, it is the antitype of the enframing sort. It gives us a picture of language as making possible new purposes, new levels of behaviour, new meanings, and hence as not explicable within a framework picture of human life conceived without language.

The classical case, and most influential first form of an enframing theory was the set of ideas developed from Hobbes through Locke to Condillac. I have discussed this in "Language and Human Nature."[1] Briefly, the Hobbes–Locke–Condillac (HLC) form of theory tried to understand language within the confines of the modern representational epistemology made dominant by Descartes. In

[1] In *Human agency and language*, Cambridge 1985.

the mind, there are "ideas." These are bits of putative representation of reality, much of it "external." Knowledge consists in having the representation actually square with the reality. This we can only hope to achieve if we put together our ideas according to a responsible procedure. Our beliefs about things are constructed, they result from a synthesis. The issue is whether the construction will be reliable and responsible or indulgent, slapdash, and delusory.

Language plays an important role in this construction. Words are given meaning by being attached to the things represented via the "ideas" which represent them. The introduction of words greatly facilitates the combination of ideas into a responsible picture. This facilitation is understood in different ways. For Hobbes and Locke, they allow us to grasp things in classes, and hence make possible synthesis wholesale where non-linguistic intuition would be confined to the painstaking association of particulars. Condillac thinks that the introduction of language gives us for the first time control over the whole process of association; it affords us "empire sur notre imagination."[2]

The constitutive theory finds its most energetic early expression in Herder, precisely in a criticism of Condillac. In a famous passage of the treatise on the *Ursprung der Sprache*, Herder repeats Condillac's fable – one might say "just so" story – of how language might have arisen between two children in a desert.[3] He professes to find something missing in this account. It seems to him to presuppose what it's meant to explain. What it's meant to explain is language, the passage from a condition in which the children emit just animal cries to the stage where they use words with meaning. The association between sign and some mental content is already there with the animal cry (what Condillac calls the "natural sign"). What is new with the "instituted sign" is that the children can now use it to focus on and manipulate the associated idea, and hence direct the whole play of their imagination. The transition just amounts to their tumbling to the notion that the association can be used in this way.

This is the classic case of an enframing theory. Language is understood in terms of certain elements: ideas, signs, and their association, which precede its arising. Before and after, the imagination is at work and association takes place. What's new is that now the mind is in control. This itself is, of course, something that didn't exist before. But the theory establishes the maximal possible continuity between before and after. The elements are the same, combination continues, only the direction changes. We can surmise that it is precisely this continuity which gives the theory its seeming clarity and explanatory power: language is robbed of its mysterious character, is related to elements that seem unproblematic.

[2] See *Leviathan*, ch. 4, Oakeshott edition, Oxford: Blackwell n.d., p. 20; *Essay concerning human understanding*, 3.3.2; *Essai sur l'origine des connaissances humaines*, 1.2.4.45–6.
[3] "Über den Ursprung der Sprache", in *Johann Gottfried Herder's Sprachphilosophie*, Hamburg: Felix Meiner 1960, pp. 12–14.

Herder starts from the intuition that language makes possible a different kind of consciousness, which he calls "reflective" (*besonnen*). That is why he finds a continuity explanation like Condillac's so frustrating and unsatisfying. The issue of what this new consciousness consists in and how it arises is not addressed, as far as Herder is concerned, by an account in terms of pre-existing elements. That's why he accuses Condillac of begging the question. "Der Abt Condillac [. . .] hat das ganze Ding Sprache schon vor der ersten Seite seines Buchs erfunden vorausgesetzt, [. . .]"[4]

What did Herder mean by "reflection" (*Besonnenheit*)? This is harder to explain. I have tried a reconstruction in *The Importance of Herder*.[5] We might try to formulate it this way: pre-linguistic beings can react to the things which surround them. But language enables us to grasp something *as* what it is. This explanation is hardly transparent, but it puts us on the track. To get a clearer idea we need to reflect on what is involved in using language.

You ask me what kind of shape this is, and I say "a triangle." Let's say it is a triangle. So I get it right. But what's involved in getting it right in this sort of case? Well, it involves something like knowing that "triangle" is the right descriptive term for this sort of thing. Perhaps I can even tell you why: "see, the thing is bounded by three straight sides." But sometimes I recognize something and I can't say very much if anything about why. I just *know* that that's a classical symphony we're hearing. Even in this case, however, I acknowledge that the question "why?" is quite in order; I can imagine working further on it and coming up with something, articulating what underlies my confidence that I've got it right.

What this brings out is that a certain understanding of the issue involved is inseparable from descriptive language, viz., that the word can be right or wrong, and that this turns on whether the described has certain characteristics. A being who uses descriptive language does so out of a sensitivity to issues of this range. This is a necessary proposition. Of a being, like a parrot, to whom we can attribute no such sensitivity, we would never say that it was describing anything, no matter how unerringly it squawked out the "right word." Of course, as we prattle on, we are rarely focusing on the issue of rightness; we only do so when we get uncertain and are plumbing unexplored depths of vocabulary. But we are being continuously responsive to rightness, and that is why we always recognize the relevance of a challenge that we have misspoken. It's this non-focal responsiveness which I'm trying to capture with the word "sensitivity."

So language involves sensitivity to the issue of rightness. The rightness in the descriptive case turns on the characteristics of the described. We might call this "intrinsic" rightness. To see what this amounts to let's look at a contrast case. There are other kinds of cases in which something we can roughly call a

4 *Urprung* p. 12.
5 "The importance of Herder", in *Philosophical arguments*, Harvard University Press 1995.

sign can be rightly or wrongly used. Suppose I train some rats to go through the door with the triangle when this is offered as an alternative to a door with a circle. The rats get to do the right thing. The right signal behaviour here is responding to the triangle positively. The rat responds to the triangle door by going through it, we might say, as I respond to the triangle by saying the word.

But now the disanalogy springs to light. What makes going through the door the right response to the triangle is that it's what brings the cheese in the end-chamber of the maze. The kind of rightness involved here is one which we can define by success in some task, here getting the cheese. Responding to the signal plays a role in completing the task, and that's why there's a "correct use" of the signal. But this is a different kind of rightness from the one involved in aligning a word with the characteristics of some described referent.

But, one might object, doesn't the rat do something analogous? Doesn't he recognize that the triangle "indicates cheese"? He is after all responding to a characteristic of the triangle door, even if an instrumental one. The rat, we might say, aligns his action with a characteristic of this door, viz., that it's the one behind which the cheese always is. So perhaps we might better "translate" his understanding by saying that the triangle indicates "rush through here." But this shift in translation alerts us to what is wrong with this assimilation. There are certainly characteristics of the situation in virtue of which "rush through here" is the right response to a triangle on a door. But getting the response right has nothing to do with identifying these characteristics or any others. That's why the question, under what precise description the rat gets it right – "that's where the cheese is," or "where reward is," or "where to jump," or whatever – is pointless and inapplicable.

What this example brings out is the difference between responding appropriately in other ways to features of the situation, on one hand, and actually identifying what these features are, on the other. The latter involves giving some definition, some explicit shape, to these features. This takes us beyond merely responding to them; or, otherwise put, it is a further response of its own special kind. This is the response we carry out in words. We characteristically define the feature in applying the word, which is why this application must be sensitive to issues of intrinsic rightness, to the fact that the word applies *because* of the defined features, else it is not properly a word.[6]

By contrast, let's call what the rat responds to a "signal," marking by this term that the response involves no definition of features, but rather rushing through to

6 Nothing in our experience really corresponds to the wordless world of the rat. But we do have experiences which illustrate what it is to take the further step beyond inarticulate action. We are sometimes asked to articulate just what we have been responding to, for instance, what angers us in a person's demeanour, or why we find some scene pleasing. Being able to say gives an explicit shape to features which were, all undefined, moulding our feelings and behaviour. This alters our stance towards these features, and often opens up new possibilities for us. I repeat: this example is not intended to offer insight into the world of animals, because much of our world is *already* articulated, even when we are not focally aware of it. I will touch on this below.

reward. Otherwise put, where responding to a signal plays a role in some task, correct signal behaviour is defined by success in that task. Unless this success is itself defined in terms of getting something intrinsically right – which is not the case for winning through to cheese – correct response to the signal need involve no definition of any particular characteristics; it just involves reacting rightly, and this is compatible with recognizing a whole host of such characteristics, or none at all: the rat just knows to rush through here; he knows from nothing about descriptions and qua what he should rush it.

The rightness involved in description is crucially different. We can't just define it in terms of success in some task – unless we define this task itself in terms of what I called above intrinsic rightness. In other words, intrinsic rightness is irreducible to what we might call task rightness simpliciter: the account only works if we have already incorporated intrinsic rightness in our success criteria.[7]

This shows a possible ambiguity in the use of expressions like "knows that this is the proper door to rush through." Applied to the rat in the above example it can just mean that he knows how to respond to the signal. But in another context, we might mean something like: knows how to apply the description "the proper door to rush through" correctly. The point of the above discussion is to show that these are very different capacities. Having the first capacity doesn't need to involve aligning any signs with reality on grounds of the features this reality displays; having the second essentially consists in acting out of sensitivity to such grounds. In the second case a certain kind of issue must be at stake, animating the behaviour, and this may be quite absent in the first.

A confusion between these two bedevils a number of discussions about animal behaviour, most notably the controversy about chimp "language." We can prescind from all the arguments whether the chimps really always sign in the appropriate way, concede the case to their protagonists, and still ask what is going on here. That an animal gives the sign "banana" only in the presence of bananas, or "want banana" only when it desires one, doesn't by itself establish what is happening. Perhaps we're dealing with a capacity of the first kind: the animal knows how to move its paws to get bananas, or attention and praise from the trainer. In fact, the sign is aligned with an object with certain features, a curved, tubular, yellow fruit. But this doesn't show that that's the point of the exercise; that the animal is responding to this issue in signing.

But only in the latter case would the chimps have "language" in something like the sense we do. In the former, we would have to see their signing behaviour

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[7] The above contrast between people describing and rats in mazes might be thought to be skewed by another obvious disanalogy between the two cases, that the person describing is emitting the signals, and the rat is only responding to them. But consider this case: certain birds are genetically constituted so that when one sights a predator he cries out, and all flee. There is a "right use" of this signal – one could imagine a case of a bird with damaged vocal chords who emitted the wrong sound, with disastrous consequences. But there is likewise no answer to the question, what precise "translation" to give to the cry: "hawk!", or "predator!", or "skedaddle!", or whatever.

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as more of a piece with the clever instrumental performances that we know chimps can master, like manipulating sticks, and moving boxes around to get at things out of reach, which Köhler described.[8] The one kind of achievement need be considered no more properly "semantic" than the other.

Whereas to be sensitive to the issue of intrinsic rightness is to be operating, as it were, in another dimension. Let me call this the "semantic dimension." Then we can say that properly linguistic beings are functioning in the semantic dimension. And that can be our way of formulating Herder's point about "reflection." To be reflective is to operate in this dimension, which means acting out of sensitivity to issues of intrinsic rightness.

But we need to extend somewhat our notion of the semantic dimension. Above I was speaking of descriptive rightness. But we do more things in language than describe. There are other ways in which a word can be *"le mot juste."* For instance, I come up with a word to articulate my feelings, and thus at the same time shape them in a certain manner. This is a function of language which cannot be reduced to simple description, at least not description of an independent object. Or else I say something which re-establishes the contact between us, puts us once again on a close and intimate footing. We need a broader concept of intrinsic rightness than just that involved in aligning words with objects.

We can get a more general description if we recur to a contrast I made above. The correct response to a signal for a rat trained in a maze was defined, I said, by success in some task. Let's use the word "sign" as a general term which can apply indiscriminately to this kind of case as well as to genuine uses of language. Then we can say that functioning with signs lies outside the semantic dimension wherever the right response is defined simply in terms of what leads to success in some non-semantically defined task. Where this account is not sufficient, the behaviour falls within the dimension.

Rats responding to triangles, and birds responding with cries to the presence of predators, meet this criterion. An account in terms of a simple task suffices. Where it fails to, we enter the semantic dimension. This can happen in two ways. First the task itself can be defined in terms of intrinsic rightness; for instance, where what we are trying to do is describe some scene correctly. Or else, where the end is something like: articulating my feelings, or re-establishing contact, the failure occurs at another point. As goals, these don't on the face of it seem to involve intrinsic rightness. But the way in which the correct sign-behaviour contributes to fulfilling them does.

Thus, when I hit on the right word to articulate my feelings, and acknowledge that I am motivated by envy, say, the term does its work because it is the right term. In other words, we can't explain the rightness of the word "envy" here simply in terms of the condition that using it produces; rather we have to account

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[8] Wolfgang Köhler.