STUDIES IN INTERACTIONAL SOCIOLINGUISTICS 21

In Other Words

Variation and reference in narrative

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Preface

There is a sense in which each event in our life is new and unique, just as each sentence in our language is one of an infinite variety of possible sentences. Yet there is also another quite different sense in which both events and sentences are recurrences – reiterations, replays, reminders – of earlier instantiations of life and language. Not only can we speak of *déjà vu* experiences when we feel that we are reliving something that has happened before, for example, but our days are often organized by routines and schedules; we follow scripts; we learn how do things by repeating them. And although our sentences may be filled with different words, and their constituents differently arranged and combined, they all follow the implicit rules of our grammar.

These two perspectives on 'same' and 'different' bring to mind something that my husband Louis once casually mentioned to me several years ago as a way to characterize people. Although Louis cannot now remember where he heard (or read) it – just as I cannot remember exactly when, how, where or why he mentioned it to me – we both remember the gist of what he said. It was this: the world can be divided into two kinds of people, either lumpers (who focus on similarities) or splitters (who focus on differences). Louis could firmly characterize himself as a splitter, in both his everyday life and his work. But I immediately began to wonder which characterization described me and my work as a linguist. Do I focus on similarities? or differences?

Consider, for example, that what I said in my initial statement implies that I lump things together. My use of the term *just as* brought together two different kinds of entities: events in our lives and sentences in a language. But I also wonder whether this lumping

together of action and knowledge is justified. Notice that the equivalence depends on the newness and uniqueness of events being similar to what seems to be the infinite reach of sentences. But is this enough to justify an overall lumping of events and sentences together?

Instead of focusing on the huge variety of both phenomena, I could just as easily highlight their differences. Consider, for example, the issue of boundaries: whereas events sometimes flow into other events with no formal boundaries separating them, sentences have beginnings and ends that firmly establish their structural integrity. Or take the material/concrete vs. mental/abstract foci. The uniqueness of each event plays out physically in a world in which 'what happens' is situated in different times, places, with different participants, with different co-occurring and adjacent events, and within different background contexts. But the infinite variety of sentences – at least as they are conceptualized by theoretical linguists – does not unfold in a material world of action and reaction: it remains a potential of our implicit knowledge of language. Do these differences obviate the importance of the similarities?

Deciding what is the same and what is different underlies a great deal of work in linguistics. *In other words* joins this discussion by focusing on how we redo references, to both entities and events, that are the same in some ways (they may evoke the same person or occurrence), but different in others: the word, phrase or sentence may shift, as may the text and interaction that provides (and creates) context. Also different is the amount of material that is redone, ranging from forms as brief as the indefinite article *a* to those as long as a narrative that is part of a life story. Not surprisingly, the time span separating an initial occurrence (of an article, a noun, a narrative) from subsequent occurrences also differs: whereas some nominal references are separated by a second, the retelling of a life story can be separated by years. And whereas contexts may remain pretty much the same for some redoings (e.g. repeating a noun that is being repaired), they may change drastically for others (e.g. retelling a narrative to a different audience ten years later).

Despite these differences, each chapter in *In other words* concerns the redoing of something that is, in some important sense, roughly the same. After describing how linguists (and others interested in language, text, and interaction) work with both implicit and explicit notions of sameness and difference (Chapter 1), we turn to repairs

of problematic referrals that adjust either *what* entity is evoked, or *how* an entity is evoked using different words (Chapter 2), repetitions (or alterations) of the definite (*the*) or indefinite (*a*) article prior to a noun (Chapter 3), repackaging a referent from noun to clause or sequence to reset its information status for a recipient, and using a variety of linguistically different, but pragmatically similar, clauses to evoke referents (Chapter 4), reissuing mentions of 'who' in referring sequences in different genres (Chapter 5), reframing 'what' and 'where' in a narrative (Chapter 6), redoing the structure of a narrative (Chapter 7) and reusing referrals in recurrent narratives (Chapter 8). A summary is in Chapter 9. Although each chapter stands on its own – and can be read on its own – taken together, they highlight how speakers resolve tensions between continuity (saying the 'same thing') and change (adapting the 'same thing' to new circumstances) during both short term (moment by moment) and long term (year by year) processes of text and talk in interaction.

The data from which I draw in many of the studies of redoings and replays in this volume result from my involvement (as a graduate student) in William Labov's research project on linguistic change and variation in Philadelphia – a study completed by Labov and his students more than twenty years ago. I have continued to rely upon these data not so much as a source of data for my more recent work, but in my teaching of sociolinguistic field methods at Georgetown. Each time that I take a small section from an interview with those whose words I once knew so well – Henry, Zelda, Irene, Jack, Freda and their neighbors – I am astonished at how useful the data continue to be and how much I missed in my earlier studies!

A question of focus, certainly: we all have to pick certain phenomena to study and thereby exclude others. But it is not just focus. When I began my study of discourse markers for my 1982 dissertation, discourse analysis was still in its early stages of development. So much is now grist for the discourse analytic mill, that the words of the speakers whose voices quickly become familiar again each time I rehear them, are now telling me new things. Of course not all of them can be reported and analyzed here. Although the reader will find some excerpts from those whom I have studied before, there are still many phenomena that will be left untapped: the pervasive turn co-constructions of Jan and Ira, or overlaps of Jack and Freda, that construct two such different marital styles; the underlying logic of

Henry's or Jack's argumentation (so different, but each so eloquent); the ideology of child rearing (including the role of gender) that Zelda presents; the construction of friendship between Henry and Irene; the theories of race, ethnicity and religion that are tested out by the couples and among neighbors.

When my interests shifted from discourse markers to the study of grammar and interaction, I turned to additional interviews from Labov's Philadelphia data. I was fortunate enough to receive a National Science Foundation grant (BNS-8819845) to study topic-related variation: how 'what we are talking about' is reflected in (cf. constrains) the internal configuration of a sentence. My analytic goals focused on different levels of 'aboutness.' One level was at the entity level, typically encoded through nouns and often in subject position in a sentence. Another level was at the proposition level: what propositions could be taken as 'given' and whether that had an impact on clause order.

The former interest led me to explore the vast literature on reference and referring terms, partially summarized in Chapter 1 and the topic of several chapters. The latter interest – on givenness at the propositional level – was further nurtured during the time I spent at University of California, Berkeley (1991–1993) where I became familiar not only with the cognitive linguistic perspectives of George Lakoff and Eve Sweetser, but also with the work of Elizabeth Traugott (from Stanford) on grammaticalization, Robin Lakoff, who helped me incorporate a more broadly based view of social and cultural processes into my work, and Suzanne Fleischman, from whom I expanded my view of narrative. These frameworks have worked their way most explicitly into part of one chapter in this book on pragmatic prototypes (Chapter 5), but they also appear in my analysis of lists (in Chapter 4) and my attention to the subtle linguistic changes in narrative retellings (Chapters 6, 7).

The NSF grant noted above has contributed to the current volume in another important way: data. I added to my original corpus of sociolinguistic interviews with seven lower middle class Jewish Americans, an additional set of eleven interviews with working class Italian Americans and Irish Americans who had been interviewed by Anne Bower. Also added was a smaller set of two interviews with middle class suburbanites (interviewed by Arvilla Payne), whose ethnic identity was not a salient part of their everyday lives, identities

and relationships. Although I did not "get to know" these people as well as the initial group that I had interviewed, their family discussions, stories of family and neighborhood life, moral dilemmas and means of co-participating in an interview have greatly enhanced my knowledge of ways of speaking.

The chapters on narrative in this book use different data and adapt somewhat different analytical approaches. My Georgetown colleague Ralph Fasold has pointed out that in addition to seeking different kinds of information about language, Linguistics also represents different modes of inquiry. He has characterized my work as using both a humanistic mode of inquiry (roughly akin to that used in literary work and recent anthropology) and a social scientific mode of inquiry (involving quantitative measurements). This makes sense to me. In fact, not just a humanistic approach, but the human side of language – how it helps people configure, manage and understand their lives – is one of the underlying attractions of the study of language for me. Yet I have also always been intrigued by the idea that there are systematic patterns (possibly quantifiable), of which we are unaware, at different levels of language (sound, form, meaning) that underlie what we say, what we mean and what we do in virtually all realms of our lives.

The effort to join the humanistic with the social scientific modes of inquiry underlies all of the articles in this book, but it is especially pertinent to those that focus more on narrative, especially narratives from oral histories of the Holocaust. I had grown up knowing about the Holocaust, and my sociolinguistic interviews with Jewish Americans often turned to topics of Jewish concern (intermarriage, anti-Semitism, Jewish history). When I learned about Holocaust oral history projects, I wondered what kind of discourse would be found there. My curiosity about this grew and I was lucky enough to be awarded a research fellowship at the Center for Advanced Holocaust Study at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Fall 2000, assisted by a Senior Faculty Research Grant from Georgetown University. There I was immersed in a community of scholars (mostly historians and political scientists) whose reliance on a wide array of texts helped me put the 'telling of personal experience' into very different analytical and interpretive contexts.

Finally, I am fortunate to be part of the Georgetown community of linguists, whose ecumenical view of linguistics has for so long

incorporated sociolinguistics (including discourse analysis and variation studies, as well as cultural approaches to language and other modalities of communication) into its canon. As usual, I am grateful for the support of Georgetown University for several Summer Research Grants at different stages of this work, and to numerous students who have helped with transcription, coding, organization and editing: Marie Troy, Virgina Zavela, Zina Haj-Hasan, Winnie Or, Anne Schmidt, Aida Premilovac, Shanna Gonzales Estigoy, Jennifer McFadden, Inge Stockburger and Margaret Toye. And of course I am grateful (as always) for the support of my family (especially Louis and David) and friends, including those in San Francisco and Washington D.C. An extra special thank you goes to my daughter Laura, who has brought immeasurable joy to all of us. I promised her that this book would be dedicated to her, and so it is.

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Variation

1.1 Introduction

Creativity and innovation appear in many different guises and on various levels of language, including sound, form, meaning and use. Instead of asking for *Cheerios* or *cereal* for breakfast, for example, my daughter blended them together and asked for *Cheerial*; when talking to some friends from a different region in the United States, my husband asked *y'all want to join us?* (rather than his own typical form *you want to join us?*); when describing a person who lived in our neighborhood, my son once coined the term *back door neighbor* to complement the term *next door neighbor.*

Linguistic creativity and innovation abound (even outside of my own immediate family!). For example, a speaker may know exactly about whom s/he is thinking when beginning a story about a specific person. But s/he may need to create a way to describe that person to an addressee that is more informative than the pronoun *she*, e.g. through a descriptive clause such as *she– y'know that woman that I met when I went with Laura, last weekend, to that festival at Glen Echo?* that actually tells a mini-story. And although we all have routine ways of asking for the salt (*Can you pass the salt?* or *Salt, please*), we may also vary our requests by saying *This food is really bland* or *Are we out of salt?* Likewise, the invitation *Care to dance?* – an utterance used as an access ritual (Goffman 1971a) that is part of the register of a particular social occasion – can be addressed to a woman (me) who accidentally bumped into a male stranger when she turned around too quickly in a checkout line at a busy shop in an international airport.

Public discourse also provides resources for creativity. Culturally familiar sentences (e.g. John F. Kennedy's *Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country*) and lines from favorite books (Tolkien's *All who wander are not lost*) appear in high school term papers and college applications. And of course even single words travel to new public locations, as when the organization People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals protests the unethical treatment of animals by labeling a chicken dinner *Holocaust on a plate* on their web site and in print advertisements.

Despite the potential for wide ranging creativity in language, such creativity does not spread completely unfettered by restrictions. Numerous limitations arise simply because our sentences follow the implicit rules of our grammar. Although the sentence *She wants to do it herself* seems fine to speakers of standard American English, the sentence *Herself wants to do it* does not. And of course the innovative examples above actually follow regular linguistic patterns: *Cheerials* conforms to the syllable structure and stress pattern of *Cheerios*; it also reflects a semantic relationship of hyponymy ('Cheerios' are a type of cereal). Other restrictions are less formally grounded and may stem from our inability to clearly formulate the propositions that convey what we know (e.g. if we are trying to explain a complex equation), to state what we think (e.g. if we are trying to make a decision about something that we feel ambivalent about) or report what we feel (e.g. if we are still in emotional anguish forty years after a traumatic experience that we are recounting during an interview). Even if we may be perfectly able to access our knowledge, thoughts, and feelings, we may nevertheless find it difficult to verbalize them eloquently, in an appropriate manner or style, or in a way that fits the needs of our recipients or the demands of a situation. Although we are constantly speaking in innovative and creative ways, then, we are also limited as to what we are able to put into words, how we may do so, to whom, when, and where these new combinations and arrangements should appear.

The tension between innovation and restriction is partially reminiscent of, but also quite different from, two other oppositions inherent in our use of language to organize our thoughts, convey our intentions and manage our lives. Illustrated in Example 1.1 are dichotomies between same and different, new and old:

Example 1.1

(a) There is another person whose name is Deborah Schiffrin.
(b) Although she has the same name as me, she spells it differently.

The opposition between same and different is illustrated by the content of line (a): the same name is used for two different people. What makes this linguistically relevant is that names are rigid designators: they denote the same individual regardless of context.[1] Names thus contrast with other ways of evoking people, such as titles and common nouns. There can be more than one person referred to as *the Dean*, and addressed as *Dean* even within a single institution. At Georgetown University, for example, there is a Dean of the College, the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, Admissions, School of Foreign Service (and so on) at any one time. Likewise, occupants of these offices change over time. Or take common nouns. If I want to talk about 'a child,' I can either talk about a generic child or specify only one 'child' of the many children in the world.

The sentences in Example 1.1 also illustrate the opposition between old and new. Once a referent has entered into the discourse, its information status changes: it is no longer new and we can use different words to evoke it. Thus, once 'another person whose name is Deborah Schiffrin' has been introduced in Example 1.1, line (a), I don't need to repeat it in all its detail in Example 1.1, line (b): instead, I can use *she* to evoke the old referent. Word order also reflects information status. In Example 1.1 (a), 'someone shares my name' is new information: it appears at the end of the sentence after the semantically weak predicate *there is*. The alternative information order is awkward. *Another person whose name is Deborah Schiffrin exists* seems appropriate only if I am announcing something (e.g. *Guess what!*) or someone has questioned the issue (*Are you sure?*). Once line (a) has been presented, however, the information about a second 'Deborah Schiffrin' is no longer new and can become a sentence initial adverbial clause *Although she has the same name as me*, line (b). And then what *is* new information – the spelling of the names – can appear at the end of the sentence.

Not all of the oppositions – innovative/fixed, different/same, new/old – that characterize our use of language have been studied by

linguists. One sort of difference that clearly matters for linguists is deciding whether a phonetic difference is associated with a different word meaning. If an unvoiced alveolar stop [t] is aspirated (ends with a puff of air) in Thai or Hindi, for example, it conveys a different word meaning than the same sequence of sounds with an *un*aspirated [t]. Not so in English: saying *Sit!* with an aspirated [t] would sound emphatic and perhaps angry, but still mean that I want my addressee (whether person or pet) to occupy a certain position in a chair or on the floor.

Of those oppositions that *are* pertinent to the systematic study of language, not all are equally interesting to the same linguists. Analyzing the role of repetitions, paraphrases and parallelisms in spoken discourse is interesting to linguists who study coherence (Becker 1984, Johnstone 1994, Tannen 1989) and intertextuality (Hamilton 1996), but perhaps less interesting to those who study reduplications, a form of morphological repetition common in pidgin and creole languages. Analyzing the organization of categories as prototypes (Rosch 1973, 1978, Taylor 1989) or radial categories (Lakoff 1987) might be interesting to cognitive linguists who study lexical meaning, but not to formal semanticists who study truth functional meaning. Other linguistic differences may be interesting to a variety of language researchers, but for quite different reasons. The analysis of speech errors, for example, interests psycholinguists because they can provide evidence for a particular model of language processing or production (e.g. Levelt 1983, 1999) or conversation analysts because of their role in the interactive construction of turns at talk (Fox and Jasperson 1995, Schegloff 1987).

One way that a subset of these oppositions – different ways of saying the 'same' thing – has been studied in Linguistics is through what sociolinguists have called variation analysis. After discussing this approach in Section 1.2, I turn to an overview of two aspects of language use on which this book will focus: *reference*, referrals to a person, place, or thing through a referring expression (Section 1.3); *narratives*, sequences of temporally ordered clauses that cluster together to report 'what happened' (Section 1.4). Each chapter (to be previewed in Section 1.5) addresses some aspect of variation that arises when the referral or the narrative recurs in a 'second position' in discourse.

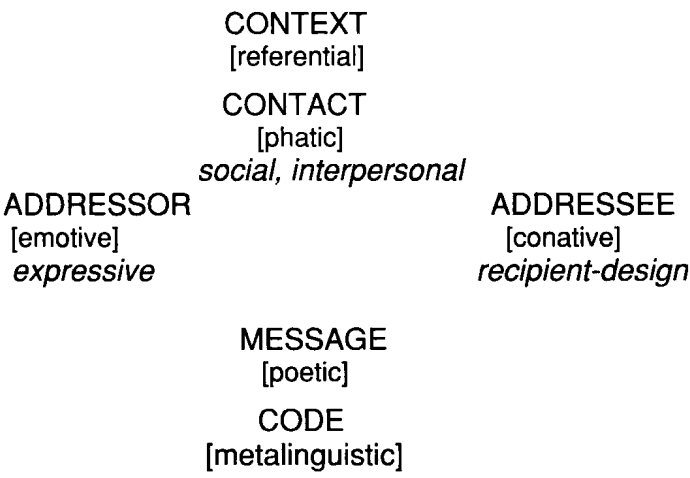

Figure 1.1 Speech functions
The situational component is in upper case; the function is bracketed; I italicize terms that I use interchangeably with Jakobson's terms.

1.2 Variation analysis: 'same' vs. 'different'

One of the main functions of language is to provide information: language is used to convey information about entities (e.g. people, objects), over time and across space, as well as their attributes, states and actions (when applicable), and relationships. The terms used to convey this function vary: denotational, representational, propositional, or ideational. Yet language clearly has more than a referential function. In figure 1.1 I have adapted Jakobson's (1960) framework, which includes not only a referential function, but also five other functions defined by the relationship between utterances and facets of the speech situation.

In addition to grounding the functions of language in the speech situation, Jakobson also makes another critical point: although an utterance may have a primary function, it is unlikely that it has only one function. *Do you know the time?*, for example, may have a phatic function (it opens contact), an emotive/expressive function (it conveys a need of the addressor), a conative/recipient-design function (it asks something of the addressee in a specific way), and a referential function (it makes reference to the world outside of language).

Despite the array of different functions that utterances serve, 'same' in Linguistics is usually understood as referential sameness: