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# Linguistic anthropology

**Alessandro Duranti**

# LINGUISTIC ANTHROPOLOGY

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## LINGUISTIC ANTHROPOLOGY

*To my students*



## PREFACE

Linguistic anthropology has undergone a considerable transformation in the last few decades. In this book I present some of the main features of this transformation. Rather than striving for a comprehensive treatise of what linguistic anthropology has been up to now, I have been very selective and often avoided topics that could have reinforced what I see as a frequent stereotype of linguistic anthropologists, namely, descriptive, non-theoretically oriented, technicians who know about phonemic analysis, historical linguistics, and “exotic” languages and can teach these subjects to anthropology students who may be wary of taking courses in linguistics departments. Rather than a comprehensive “everything-you-always-wanted-to-know-about-language-but-were-afraid-to-ask” for cultural anthropologists and other social scientists, this volume is conceived as a statement about contemporary research on language and culture from a particular point of view. This view is my own but it also echoes the work of a number of productive researchers in departments of anthropology, linguistics, applied linguistics, sociology, folklore, performance studies, philosophy, ethnomusicology, and communication. Whether or not they see themselves as doing linguistic anthropology, the researchers from whose work I extensively drew are all concerned with the study of language as a cultural resource and with speaking as a cultural practice, rely on ethnography as an essential element of their analyses and find intellectual inspiration from a variety of philosophical sources in the social sciences and the humanities. What unites them is the emphasis on communicative practices as constitutive of the culture of everyday life and a view of language as a powerful tool rather than a mirror of social realities established elsewhere.

The focus on the history, logic, and ethics of research found in this book is unusual in linguistics but common among anthropologists, who have long been concerned with the politics of representation and the effects of their work on the communities they study.

Like any other writer of introductory books, for every chapter, section, or paragraph I had to choose among dozens of possible ways of presenting a



## Preface

concept, making connections with other fields, or finding appropriate examples from the literature or my own research experience. Simplicity of exposition and recognition of historical sources were often in conflict and I am aware of the fact that I have not given adequate space to many important authors and topics. In particular, I said very little about three areas that are traditionally associated with linguistic anthropology, namely, language change, areal linguistics, and pidgins and creoles. These and related topics are however dealt with in other volumes in this series such as Hudson's *Sociolinguistics* and Bynon's *Historical Linguistics*. I have also said relatively little about such classic pragmatic notions as conversational implicatures and presuppositions; these themes receive adequate attention in Levinson's *Pragmatics* and Brown and Yule's *Discourse Analysis*, also in this series. Finally, I hardly touched the burgeoning literature on language socialization and did not include the impressive body of work currently devoted to literacy and education. I hope that future volumes in the series will develop these important areas to the readers' satisfaction.

There is another way in which this volume complements the other volumes in the series, namely, in the attention given to culture and the methods for its study. I have dedicated an entire chapter to current theories of culture. I have also written two methods chapters: one on ethnography and the other on transcribing live discourse. Finally, I have discussed several paradigms – structuralist analysis, speech act theory, conversation analysis – from the point of view of their contribution to an anthropological theory of language.

The book is aimed at upper-division undergraduate courses and introductory graduate seminars on linguistic anthropology or (as they are often called) “language *and* (or *in*) culture” courses. Instructors who like challenges should be able to experiment with at least some of the chapters for lower division classes that deal with culture and communication. I have for instance used the chapters on theories of cultures and ethnography with some success with freshmen. I also believe that instructors can easily remedy whatever thematic, methodological, and theoretical lacunae they will detect in the book by integrating its chapters with additional articles or monographs in linguistic anthropology. Finally, all chapters are written to stand on their own. Hence, students and researchers interested in selected issues or paradigms should be able to read selectively without feeling lost.

When I was an undergraduate student at the University of Rome, one day I discovered a small library on the third floor of the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy. It was filled with books and journals about languages, many of which had names I had never heard before. As I became acquainted with the people who frequented that library – instructors, students, and visiting scholars from other parts of Italy or from other countries –, I also developed a sense of

curiosity for the knowledge contained in those rich descriptions of linguistic phenomena. My later experiences – as a graduate student, fieldworker, university researcher, and teacher – have not altered that earlier curiosity for linguistic forms and their description. In the meantime, I have also developed something new: a commitment to understanding language as the voice, tool, and foundation for any human experience. It is this commitment that I have tried to articulate in this book.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Over the last twenty-five years I have ventured into a number of fields and paradigms, searching for a way of studying languages that would preserve the richness of linguistic communication as we live it and know it in everyday encounters. This book is my first attempt to put many of these strands together in a systematic way. Many teachers and colleagues have guided me in this unending quest, suggesting models of communication, cognition, and interaction that are increasingly sensitive to the fluid, co-constructed, constitutive force of language as a system of tools among other tools, stock of knowledge among other stocks of knowledge, semiotic resources among other resources, physical sounds or marks on paper among other physical objects in our lifeworld. At the University of Rome, in the early 1970s, I was fortunate to be around a group of young and innovative scholars who were shaping new ways of making connections between language, cognition and culture. Among them, it was Giorgio Raimondo Cardona who first introduced me to linguistic anthropology and encouraged me to work on my first article, on Korean speech levels. My graduate years in the Department of Linguistics at the University of Southern California coincided with what I regard as the golden age of that department and perhaps of linguistics in the US, when linguistics students and teachers with the most diverse backgrounds and interests easily conversed with each other and believed that no one paradigm could alone provide all the answers or should be used as a measure for the success of everyone's accomplishments. My two postdoctoral experiences, at the Australian National University, in the Department of Anthropology of the Research School of Pacific Studies in 1980–81, and at the Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition at the University of California at San Diego in 1983–84, opened up several new intellectual horizons, including an interest in new technologies for research and education, Vygotskian psychology, and Bakhtinian linguistics. During the 1980s, I held positions at the University of Rome, in the newly formed department of Studi Glottoantropologici, at the University of California, San Diego (Department of Communication) and at Pitzer College, where I taught courses

## *Acknowledgments*

on linguistics, computers as tools, and film theory and production. These appointments and the people I interacted with kept me intellectually engaged and hopeful during difficult years, when I wasn't sure I would be able to stay in academia. My appointment in linguistic anthropology at the University of California, Los Angeles, in 1988 provided an ideal working environment that has recently culminated with the establishment of an interdisciplinary center for the study of language, interaction, and culture. It is quite obvious to me that this book is partly coauthored by the voices and ideas of the many scholars I interacted with in these and other institutions over more than two decades. Among them, I owe the most to one person: my wife Elinor Ochs, the most creative linguistic anthropologist I have ever met. From our fieldwork experience in Western Samoa to the postdoctoral fellowship at ANU and all the way to the more recent years together at UCLA, Elinor has shown me again and again how to transform primitive intuitions and precarious associations into stories that can be shared with an audience. I hope this book will be one of those stories.

A number of people generously gave me feedback on earlier drafts. Elizabeth Keating worked as my editor for my first draft, providing many crucial insights on content and format; Rowanne Henry, Jennifer Schlegel, and Diana Wilson gave me useful comments on several chapters; Jennifer Reynolds and Melissa Lefko Foutz helped me locate references. Special thanks go to Asif Agha and Lisa Capps for many detailed suggestions and positive reinforcement on my second draft. Finally, I owe a great deal to four colleagues who acted as reviewers for Cambridge University Press: Jane Hill (who carefully read and gave feedback on two drafts), Paul Garrett, Susanne Romaine, and Bambi Schieffelin. Their comments and questions made the text more readable and hopefully more useful. Any remaining shortcomings are, of course, my own responsibility.

The idea of this book came out of a conversation at the Congo Cafe in Santa Monica with my editor Judith Ayling in the Spring of 1992. She didn't know then how much work – including countless messages over electronic mail – this would cost her. I am very thankful to Judith for her encouragement and her wise decisions at different stages of this project.

The less obvious and yet most important help in writing this book came from my family. The warm and stimulating environment Elinor and I routinely enjoy in our house owes a great deal to our son Marco's affection, generosity, and unique thirst for learning. My parents' emotional and material support in running our household during the winter, when they come to stay with us in California, is invaluable. Between Christmas and Easter, I can afford to sit writing at the computer or reading an article only because I know that my mother is preparing a delicious dinner and my father is fixing the latest problem with the roof in some very original and inexpensive way.

This book is dedicated to the people that have made this effort meaningful, my students. In large undergraduate courses just as much as in small graduate seminars, I often perceive the overwhelming passion and determination with which many students implicitly ask for a lesson about language that could go beyond the rigid canons of academia and reach into the meaning of life. Needless to say, very rarely do I feel able to even come close to delivering such a precious message, but their confidence that I might do it one day is a reward for my efforts to communicate across generational and cultural boundaries. This book is a modest but sincere acknowledgment of their trust and an invitation to continue our conversations.

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