SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY
AND LANGUAGE

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Editor's Preface

The Conference on the topic to which this volume is devoted took place at the University of Sussex in April 1969. The papers included were all circulated and discussed on that occasion, except for those by Miss Henson and Professor Whiteley, which were specially written for publication here. I should like to thank Dr Edmund Leach, Dr Jean La Fontaine, and Dr Anthony Forge for leading the discussion on three of the papers. The ASA is particularly indebted to its guests Dr Crystal (Reading), Dr Denison (London School of Economics), Professor Hymes (Pennsylvania, and Clare Hall, Cambridge), Dr Milner (School of Oriental and African Studies), Dr (now Professor) Pride (Leeds, now Wellington), and Professor Robins (School of Oriental and African Studies). I would also like to thank especially the younger contributors Mrs C. Humphrey (Cambridge), Miss H. Henson (Oxford), and Miss (now Dr) E. Tonkin (Oxford, now Birmingham), for giving papers from their current researches.

Warm thanks are due to the University of Sussex, which accommodated the Conference, and to Dr Peter Lloyd, who was responsible for the local arrangements.

Finally, I am grateful to my wife Shirley Ardener, and to Rosamund Robson of Tavistock Publications, for invaluable assistance in putting this volume through the press. Mr Malcolm Crick kindly prepared the indexes.

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Introductory Essay: Social Anthropology and Language

The failure of the great middle generation of social anthropologists to respond to the challenge of language has long been one of the curiosities of the British school of the subject; and possibly nothing today so clearly exemplifies that sadly widening rift between the older and the newer social anthropology than the different attitudes to language to be found on either side. This is in great contrast to the 'cultural anthropology' of the United States, in which the study of language has never lost its place. There, indeed, even linguistic anthropology has developed far beyond the proportions of a mere sub-field of anthropology – its vast literature is beginning to exceed what anyone but a full-time specialist can assimilate. Of course, the autonomy as an academic discipline of linguistics without special labels has everywhere been long established, and it might therefore appear both economical and logical that its study should be left to specialists. This may once have seemed a reasonable view to take. During the forties and fifties, however, when British theoretical social anthropology often gave the impression of resting after the exertions of the Malinowskian period, scientific linguistics made one or two striking advances of sufficient importance to begin to bear upon thought in neighbouring disciplines. As far as British social anthropology as a whole was concerned, it became aware of these advances with the growing influence of Lévi-Strauss. It is something of an irony that this situation should exist: that the influence of thought purportedly derived in some part from linguistics should have come to be so important in British social anthropology, when the direct study of linguistics had for so long lapsed.

The importance of Malinowski for the London school of linguistics obscured this situation. As Miss Henson shows, British social anthropologists have been ill at ease with language

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ever since the nineteenth-century beginnings. The early developments in comparative philology were, it is true, in many ways a hindrance rather than a help to theoretical development, encouraging as they did some of the less fruitful speculations on race and primitive origins. At Oxford the German Max Müller tried to express before his time, although in a form subsequently much criticized (Evans-Pritchard, 1965: 20–23), some of the links between language and myth, which were not explored again in this country with official approval for another half-century. The philological movement of the 1870s under Brugmann and his colleagues seemed to make no impact. As far as British anthropology was concerned, the Neogrammarians lived and died unnoted. Ferdinand de Saussure lectured in the first decade of this century on topics such as synchrony and diachrony, and subsequently remained uncited by anthropologists whose treatment of these subjects was less skilful. Malinowski taught his pupils to 'learn the language', and it is a tribute that many so successfully made the attempt with what seems in retrospect so relatively little awareness of the main advances in descriptive linguistics in the twenties and thirties. In the United States anthropological linguistics flowed from decade to decade, from Boas to Sapir, up to the present day, almost unremarked. Glottochronology rose and fell. Information theory appeared in 1948, fructified linguistics and psychology, and slowly went out of fashion, while few British anthropologists noticed. Chomsky flourished for a decade before many could haltingly spell his name. Only in one or two academic centres that had preserved links with a wider intellectual world was it possible in the later fifties and the sixties for influences from the French and American schools to be gathered together and fed into the British tradition.

Had all this truly been the expression of supreme disciplinary self-confidence, it might have been wholly admirable. But in fact, after 1960, at the same time that the most lively issues were being raised as a result of the newer movements, the image-makers of the profession seemed to be sunk in a mood of breast-beating (below, p. lxviii) which ran the risk of being taken at its face value by the growing 'social science' establishment. The idea of the relevance of theoretical linguistics to social anthropological theory never made much practical headway in

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anthropological circles in London after Malinowski (despite pioneering efforts by Milner, 1954, and more recently by Whiteley, 1966), and in the social structure of British anthropology London has carried considerable weight, even in her more somnolent periods.

By 1969, when the ASA symposium on language was convened, the number of full members of the Association who yet felt qualified to offer formal papers was still very few. Even some of these were for one reason or another unable to present papers, and are therefore not represented here, except by citation of their writings. Others made valuable oral contributions. The linguists who came as our guests, and who are represented here, have been very generous in their support of our relatively untutored steps.

This volume, accordingly, has to try to achieve several aims (whatever may be the chances of success). Its first aim is to be read *primarily* by social anthropologists, and by them not as a merely specialist branch of their subject, but as an illustration of certain post-functionalist trends of general relevance. Second, to provide an introduction to the range of possible work that may be or has been done, and to put it in the perspective of earlier trends both in social anthropology and in linguistics. Third, to offer some collaborative insights to the growing body of linguists and other scholars with 'sociolinguistic' interests.

For the first aim, much of this introductory essay especially will restate a number of linguistically well-worn themes in what may at times be a rather elementary manner. It is, however, generally in an anthropological manner, if not in the only possible anthropological manner. I have drawn here on some of my lectures at Oxford between 1964 and 1969. It is possible that the discussion may at times be directed rather closely to illumination of the failings of the past, while leaving itself open to more serious criticisms from social anthropologists who take its purpose for granted, but may doubt the skill of its achievement. Even since the Conference was first planned in 1967 there have come to be a greater number of linguistically trained anthropologists in the ASA itself. The weaknesses will, I hope, be accepted in a tolerant manner as due to the particular period at which this volume was compiled. Possibly it will be received across the Atlantic as yet more evidence of past and present

'insularity' and 'parochialism', charges which are seemingly now inseparable from the American view of British social anthropology (Murdock, 1951; R. Firth, 1951; M. Harris, 1969). We may perhaps be shielded in part by the contribution of one of their most eminent linguistic anthropologists. It is no doubt true that 'ASA' social anthropologists should educate themselves about language by turning to the copious work in anthropology at large. There should be no need for an internal debate mediated by special interpreters. All of which having been said, any approach to language the British school may have, is, or is likely to be, distinctive and must grow from its own interests.

For the second aim, the whole volume is offered, with its contributors' cited bibliographies as partial evidence. Here we depend most heavily on our linguistic colleagues. Certain topics are not represented: in particular the contribution from philosophers which would illuminate many of the topics touched upon. The major deliberate omission from the social anthropological point of view is the direct consideration of kinship terminology, since the next volume in this series is devoted to the study of kinship, under the editorship of a foremost specialist (Needham, 1971). A later volume is to concern itself with other aspects of cognition. The approach here is, however, clearly in line with and owes very much to the main developments in these fields.

The third aim may at first sight seem unlikely to be implemented in the light of the long absence of British social anthropology from linguistics. This we did not believe was shown to be the case at the Conference. Absence from the direct study of language had had some advantages. Social anthropology had developed independently insights that had some relevance to linguistic movements, and as a professional subject in its own right it is perfectly well equipped to evaluate the 'social' component of any proposed sociolinguistics, if it is asked to do so. The subject has its *Junggrammatiker*, even though Leitner's view of the early Neogrammarians ('literary terrorism exercised by a set of Sanscritists' – below, p. 25 n. 2) serves as the prejudicial model for much anthropological comprehension of the 'neo-anthropological' movements! For linguists, it may be sufficient to offer as our justification, and aspiration, a text suitably amended from Hjelmslev (1963: 127):

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Introductory Essay

'A temporary restriction of the field of vision was the price that had to be paid to elicit from [society] itself its secret. But precisely through that immanent point of view and by virtue of it, [social anthropology] itself returns the price that it demanded.'

We may as well begin with Lévi-Strauss's three levels of contact between the subject-matters of the two disciplines: (1) the relationship between a [single] language and a [single] culture, (2) the relationship between language and culture, and (3) the relationship between linguistics as a scientific discipline and anthropology (Lévi-Strauss, 1963a: 67–68; J. R. Firth, 1957b: 116; Hymes, 1964: xxi; Whiteley, 1966: 139). These divisions are hardly exhaustive, however, and the first two are very closely linked. Hymes (1964) shows how difficult they are to use in practice, and suggests a score of distinctions that must be taken into account (pp. xxv–xxviii). Not least, of course, among the many long debates that are possible is whether 'language' is to be classed as part of 'culture', to be opposed to 'culture', to be a determinant of 'culture', or what – as if 'culture' (and 'language' too?) in this context was not itself a term of art obscuring any solution.

I prefer to introduce the matter here from a somewhat different point of view, by taking three levels on which social anthropologists in this country have viewed the relevance of linguistics to their subject over the last generation or two. The idea of levels here derives from the observed tendency of British social anthropologists to *isolate* pieces of the study of language for their own purposes. They may be labelled in this way:

1. A *technical level*: on which social anthropologists might seek and receive help in actually learning languages, especially those exotic and unwritten languages with which they characteristically have to work.

2. A *pragmatic level*: on which they might seek what help, if any, linguistic data can give in the interpretation of anthropological data in a given region or among a given people.

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3. The *level of explanation*: on which they might seek the relevance, if any, of theories *about* language, even of theories about linguistics, to theories *about* society, or about culture, or about the place and aims of social anthropology.

In this country, as I have said, the three levels tend to have been treated separately. At all times there has been some interest at level (1). Sometimes there has been interest at level (2). Nowadays there has been considerable interest at level (3). These split relations with linguistics have correspondingly split the apprehension of language as a whole, especially among post-Malinowskians. These levels, then, form a useful starting-point for discussion on the way to disposing of them.

THE TECHNICAL LEVEL

Among the main body of social anthropologists since Malinowski a knowledge of the language is taken for granted as a *sine qua non* of good fieldwork. As it has been summarily put:

> 'Sociologists usually speak the same language (more or less) as the people they study, and they share with them at least some of their basic concepts and categories. But for the social anthropologist the most difficult task is usually to understand the language and ways of thought of the people he studies, which may be – and probably are – very different from his own. This is why in anthropological field-work a sound knowledge of the language of the community being studied is indispensable, for a people's categories of thought and the forms of their language are inextricably bound together' (Beattie, 1964a: 31).

This view, with its stress on categories of thought, was an important advance on the more mechanistic attitude of many writers, among whom there was often an unreflecting faith in the linguistic ability of the average social anthropologist. Interpreters seemed to be abhorred – even hated. Now, there are many very good reasons why interpreters should not be relied upon in social anthropology. No doubt most writers had in mind the khaki-uniformed figures (frequently corrupt) used by

the colonial administrations. We must only comment on the surprising insouciance to be found among social anthropologists on the subject of what is possible in adult language-learning. Professor Fortes exemplifies the problems involved very clearly in his Introduction to *The Dynamics of Clanship among the Tallensi*. He says:

> 'As there is no linguistic literature for the Tallensi we had to learn their dialect from scratch, with the assistance of a semi-literate interpreter and the scanty literature on Mole-Dagbane.'

So far so good.

> 'It took us about six months to learn enough Talni for workaday communication with the people. By the end of the first tour we became proficient enough to dispense with an interpreter. Nevertheless, I know only too well that we reached but a moderate standard in our vocabulary and in our appreciation of the finer shades of thought and feeling that can be expressed in Talni' (1945: xii).

Let us abstract the sense of this statement: for six months the anthropologist had no 'workaday communication' except through a semi-literate interpreter. He finally, after a 'tour' (eighteen months?) dispensed with an interpreter when he still had only 'a moderate standard of vocabulary' and could not fully appreciate the 'finer shades' of Talni. This is the linguistic mesh through which it is purported that Tallensi culture is given to us. To say this is, of course, not to impugn Fortes's fieldwork. One may confidently take this writer as an example, precisely because his technical linguistic ability shows on every page. We are dealing with a mode of expression: in the ideology of that period, which from that point of view can only now be said to be ending, interpreters were always 'dispensed with' as if sucked dry and banished. The notion of the language well and truly learnt belonged with the lean-jawed traveller of the 'I-rapped-out-a-few-words-of-Swahili' type, and had romantic rather than realistic origins. One suspects Malinowski of encouraging this particular brand of naïveté, although the American Boasians were not free from it either. It should be emphasized that anthropological practice was evidently vastly superior

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to the view of language that purported to direct it. Neverthe-
less, to regard language as a tool of research presenting very
few problems was mistaken, and it is no coincidence that the
most delicate work of modern social anthropologists in the fields
of myth, belief, and symbolism commonly rests upon firm
foundations of sound education outside social anthropology in
languages, philosophy, classics, or one of the other rigorous
humanities.

Technical courses in linguistics were taken by many field-
workers, but they did not, despite the mechanistic views current,
have the effect of producing general familiarity among social
anthropologists with the ordinary jargon of descriptive lin-
guistics. This contrasts with the American case. It is not entirely
unadmirable, to be sure. The point is made here merely to
emphasize that a technical view of language has not necessarily
led to any common familiarity with language technicalities.
Indeed, even among graduate students the signs used in
ordinary phonological transcription of no great sophistication
tend to awaken much the same revulsion as those used in
mathematics (or in elementary statistics). This must be due
precisely to a mechanistic view of both: the elements of tech-
nical linguistics (as, for many, those of statistics) are to be
mugged up for special purposes, the principles perhaps only
barely understood. They go with travel inoculations, not to be
seriously thought about until necessary. The post-Malinowskian
view of language worked with an abiding faith in 'fieldworkers'
modified Berlitz' – a kind of 'look, listen, and say'. In an im-
portant sense Malinowski's 'context of situation' was a theo-
retical charter for this faith: as if context would tell all if you
really had eyes to see. In practice there was commonly recourse
to bilinguals or, rather, partial or inadequate bilinguals, as we
should expect. It was not that social anthropologists failed to
learn the languages, but that they did not accord their achieve-
ments the intellectual status they deserved. They clearly learnt
something, but they never examined how they did it, or publicly
exchanged detailed ideas on it, or built up their experience
from one another's mistakes.[1] Even an otherwise excellent and
up-to-date fieldwork symposium like Epstein's (1967) has no
chapter on language (and no reference to it in the index).
Malinowski's own contribution is discussed in this volume; we

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touch here on the failure of his most representative pupils to
regard the study of language, even at that technical level upon
which modern fieldwork might be thought implicitly to depend,
as more than another subject to remain necessarily naïve
about – like psychoanalysis or macro-economics (Gluckman,
1964).

The truly formidable problem of communication between the
fieldworking social anthropologist and the members of the other
society lies at the heart of traditional social anthropology,
although few untutored readers would have guessed this from
the blander monographs of the last thirty years. There are
exceptions: the classical account of Evans-Pritchard, for ex-
ample (1940), or, more recently, the linguistically candid state-
ment of Maybury-Lewis (1967). Generally, in the monographs
themselves the struggle is over. The contradiction between the
scale of the task of interpretation and the supposed linguistic
apparatus involved is remarkably great, as we have seen. It
may be resolved in this way. Even the most exemplary tech-
nical approach to language would not in fact have solved the
basic problem of communication. The anthropological 'experi-
ence' derives from the apprehension of a critical lack of fit of
(at least) two entire world-views, one to another. The crudity
of the functionalists' linguistic tools did not therefore impede
this insight. On the contrary, the experience of *mis*understand-
ing is crucial to it. Had all social anthropologists been really
thoroughly trained in (say) the phonemics of their day, it is
even possible that they would in fact have become far less
quickly aware that transcriptions are not enough. The problem
might have been obscured, as it is in some Western sociology,
by an apparently detailed, but really superficial, comprehension.
Post-Malinowskians talked as if they used language as a 'tool'
for the understanding of societies, but in fact they were forced
to attempt this understanding by the imposition upon their
material of various 'structures', of which the intuitive and
observational bases were only partially open to examination.
By the fifties the existential status of such structures had become
a worry to the thoughtful. The stage was set for the discussion
of 'models', cognitive categories, and the like. The study of
language had, of course, a real relevance to social anthropo-
logists concerned with these subjects, not primarily at the

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technical level but, on the contrary, at the more general levels of linguistic theory and practice.

These remarks are certainly not intended to turn into a virtue a wrong-headed approach to language. French and American social anthropologists arrived at similar ends without detachment from the study of language. They do, however, suggest why the functionalist ethnographic monographs of the postwar period contain few classics, and why on the contrary the most interesting recent work has lain not in traditional ethnography but in the analysis of primitive (and scientific) models of the world.

THE PRAGMATIC LEVEL

The second level of contact between social anthropology and linguistics has been essentially one at the level of 'data'. There was a time when much of the most fruitful interaction between the two disciplines could be placed under this head. It has always been common, for example, for anthropologists, especially in America, to be concerned with the historical implications of linguistic material. Where well-established literary and linguistic specialisms have existed for certain cultures and regions, social anthropologists have turned to them with gratitude (for example: for Indian studies, Dumont and Pocock, 1957–66; for Sinology, Freedman, 1963). The general revival of historical interests in British social anthropology since the fifties (Evans-Pritchard, 1950, 1961a) has also directed attention to linguistic work in more traditional ethnographic areas. Thus, classifications of the languages of Africa which have thrown new and frequently confusing light on the history of the continent (Greenberg, 1963b; and Guthrie, 1948, 1953, 1962) have led to some concern with the nature of the classification of languages and its relation to tribe (cf. Ardener, 1967: 293–299; Chilver and Kaberry, 1968: 9–12). Similarly deriving from problems in the classification of exotic languages there has been awareness of the work of Swadesh and of the theories associated with the names 'lexicostatistics' and 'glottochronology' (Swadesh, 1950; Hymes, 1960). The native tradition for these historico-linguistic interests goes back through administrator-anthropologists like Meek (e.g. 1931), Talbot (e.g. 1912), and

Northcote Thomas (e.g. 1914). Such men were, however, out of fashion for a long time, and were later frequently accorded the reduced style of 'ethnologist'.

At this level, there is a sense in which social anthropology has been able to 'take or leave' the contributions from linguistics. The two kinds of data, social and linguistic, did not always mix well, and it is paradoxically because of some contacts at this level that the dissatisfaction with linguistics characteristic of the majority of postwar functionalists has been confirmed. The workers in the two subjects inevitably build numerous working theories on detailed data which do not necessarily hold much insight for each other. It is at this level also that ideals of 'teamwork' or even of common seminars between working social anthropologists and working linguists sometimes fail to be effective. As we shall see, Lévi-Strauss spent years struggling with linguistic terminology on this level, and did not begin to clarify his notion of the relevance of structural linguistics until he had in effect abandoned the pragmatic level for the level of explanation. The best recent work in sociolinguistics does not restrict itself to one level of operation: it looks for unifying principles within which the specific methods and data of social anthropology and linguistics can be used, each to its own best advantage. Nevertheless, a good modern field in which pragmatic contacts can be made lies in work concerned with the way in which members of societies classify their environment. A discussion here will serve to introduce in a practical way some of the implications to be further considered at the level of explanation.

Classification and category

This field of linguistics abuts squarely upon the concerns of social anthropology. Long ago, Durkheim and Mauss (trans. 1963) drew attention to certain unifying principles linking the social and mental categories of a people. Many well-known names in American linguistic and cultural anthropology (for example, Sapir, 1921; Whorf, 1956; Pike, 1954; Conklin, 1955; Lounsbury, 1956; Goodenough, 1956; Frake, 1961; and others) have made contributions in different ways in this field (sometimes inadequately called 'cognitive'), as well as European social

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anthropologists like Lévi-Strauss (in much of his vast corpus), Leach (e.g. 1964), Douglas (1966), and Needham (e.g. 1960b). Some of the developments have become very intricate. Broadly speaking, most of this work confirms Saussure's conclusion that language is not simply a labelling device for elements of the 'real' world. Rather, there is some relationship between the categories through which the world is experienced and the language used to express them. Propositions phrased loosely in this way are not a matter of serious conflict of opinion, but the long-standing philosophical and metaphysical questions they raise are far from solved (L. J. Cohen, 1966; Hook, 1969: 3–47). The extreme view that language actually determines the world-view in a quasi-independent manner is usually attributed to Whorf, and this version is commonly rejected (see Hoijer, 1955; L. J. Cohen, 1966: 82–94). In some respects the work of the German semanticists is nowadays more stimulating because of their more truly structural approach, deriving from Saussure. A debt is owed to Ullmann (1951) for making their works more familiar in this country.

For those social anthropologists to whom the general implications of this body of work are still new, they may be best illustrated by taking the usual elementary example: the classical case of colour terminology. That is: the manner in which the physical colour spectrum is divided in different languages. We may take the example, first popularized by Hjelmslev (1943: 48–49; trans. 1963: 52–53), of the different range of reference of certain colour terms in English and Welsh, whose reprinting[2] yet again I justify by adding, for my own purposes, columns for modern colloquial Welsh and for Ibo, and extending the spectrum to include 'black' (*Figure 1*).

How we interpret the relationship between the underlying reality and the 'imposed classification' is controversial. The Newtonian colour labels for the divisions of the spectrum do not provide such a reality, for they classically exemplify the same process. It is recorded that Newton called in a friend to label the colours of his spectrum, because he himself was not skilled at distinguishing hues. He wished that there should be seven colours, and the term 'indigo' was used to make up the number.[3] This quite extraordinary tale reveals much about the category 'seven' in Renaissance scientific thought, and about

the importations of indigo dye to Europe in the same period. Work has been done, nevertheless, suggesting that there are certain essential details given in any colour classification which make for universals in the classification of colours at a much deeper level than that revealed by a simple comparison of different systems. There is in none of these respects any true difference in principle between the commonplace, but always striking, example of colour classification and various other

FIGURE 1   *Certain colour categories*

ENGLISH	STANDARD WELSH	MODERN COLLOQUIAL WELSH	IBO
green	gwyrdd	gwyrdd	ahehea ndu
blue	glas	glas	ahehea ndu
grey	llwyd	llwyd	ojii
brown	llwyd	brown	ojii
black	du	du	ojii

categories imposed upon the social and physical environment by different sociolinguistic communities.

The intuition that a total relativism is unproductive has been supported by the evidence from comparative study, which suggests that a necessary relativism *vis-à-vis* (for example) the categories of English need not lead us to assume a total arbitrariness in all human categorization. I do not intend to enter far into this debate as far as kinship terms are concerned. Lounsbury (1969: 18) has referred to some positions taken by colleagues of mine (e.g. Beattie, 1964b) together with that of, for example, Leach (1958), as examples of the 'extreme relativist view'. These and some apparently similar approaches (Needham, e.g. 1958) in fact avoid his charge since their effect is to attribute to the kinship structure homologies with other symbolic structures (not necessarily genealogical) which are or may be attributed to universals of another sort – those