

## THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF LANGUAGE AND DISCOURSE

**Brigitte M. French**

*Grinnell College, Grinnell, Iowa, U.S.A*

**Keywords:** context, discourse, epistemology, ethnography, identity, indexicality, language rights, linguistic anthropology, narrative, semiotics, social memory, globalization

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### Summary

The complexities of human language in relation to its communities of users, their aesthetics, their values, their identities, and their worldviews have captured the analytic attention of scholars for centuries. These topics related to the social aspects of language use are at the forefront of global concerns now linked with cultural diversity, political equality, and cultural knowledge in challenging and often unequal social contexts. Linguistic anthropology, a sub-field of the discipline that deals with the use of language as a multi-faceted sign system in social contexts, is well-positioned to empirically elucidate the intricacies of the ways that language use is constitutive of unique cultural forms, epistemologies, and practices. This chapter identifies key concepts, theorists, methods, and themes in linguistic anthropology for investigating the importance of language in social life.

It begins by discussing the historical emergence of linguistic anthropology as field of inquiry. It then outlines the development of linguistic anthropology from semiotic and ethnographic perspectives that form the cornerstone of current analyses. It turns to a discussion of the ways that language use is constitutive of and constituted by collective social groups. Here, questions of belonging and scales of analysis are central concerns. The next section attends to social exclusions that may be entailed in constructions of language and identity and introduces scholarship on ideologies of language as a key way to investigate relationships between interactional level discourse practices and institutional levels of inequality. An understanding of this innovative perspective enables us to focus on the global issue of language endangerment and related international calls for linguistic human rights. The final section foregrounds narratives of historical trauma and the ways that culturally-situated understandings of the past may be implicated in

possibilities for future justice through attention to the circulation of discourse. It concludes with a brief suggestion of the ways discourse practices and ideologies figure into processes of globalization.

## 1. Introduction

Seeking to understand the myriad ways that language use is inextricably, yet variably connected with the diversity of cultural practices and communities around the globe is an enduring concern central to the human imagination. While inquiries into these relationships between language and social life certainly precede the formalization of linguistic anthropology as an academic sub-discipline in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, linguistic anthropology has developed methods and theories by which to systematically research them in broad conversation with interdisciplinary scholars in sociolinguistics, communication studies, and discourse analysis as well as in conversation with community members who are invested in culturally-specific notions, uses, and ideologies of language.

As a central component of consolidating anthropology as an academic discipline, founding scholar, Franz Boas called for the ethnographic investigation of language and asserted that in order to study any aspect of “culture” in a meaningful way, it must be done through the local languages in a given community. As part of the dual project of defining anthropological inquiry and scientifically fighting against racist and ethnocentric scholarship, Boas marshaled comparative historical, ethnographic, and linguistic data to show how peoples’ language, culture, and race could not be neatly mapped onto each other as isomorphic and transparent entities. Rather, Boas (1922) demonstrated multiple ways in which language, culture, and race developed along independent historical trajectories within and across communities. In this way, Boas challenged the assumptions and arguments of cultural evolutionary thought prevalent in social science at the time that problematically ranked communities, languages, and races into “primitive” and “complex” ones with European societies and languages at the top of the hierarchy and those in indigenous communities and/or the global South at the bottom (Briggs 2002). It is from this anchoring historical point moving into the 21<sup>st</sup> century that linguistic anthropology has empirically demonstrated and is ethically committed to understanding the deep analytic equality of all language varieties in conceptual terms while recognizing their unique structural and semiotic properties and investigating their enduring and dynamic connections to the communities which use them.

Boas’ student, Edward Sapir became the first professional anthropologist in the North American context to be fully dedicated to the empirical investigation of the language and culture nexus. Sapir followed the heuristic established by Boas and developed a more robust understanding of human language use in social life. In particular, Sapir pointed to the importance of investigating the inherently creative potential of human language that took multiple linguistic forms and social functions which were not predetermined. Sapir (1933) explained:

“Once the form of a language is established it can discover meanings for its speakers which are not simply traceable to the given quality of experience itself but must be explained to a large extent as the projection of potential meanings into the raw material

of experience. . . Language has the power to analyze experience into theoretically dissociable elements and to create that world of the potential intergrading with the actual which enables human beings to transcend the immediately given in their individual experience and to join in a larger common understanding. This common understanding constitutes culture.”

In this way, Sapir directed analytic attention to the productive, rather than merely instrumental, role that language plays in cultural formations in relation to humans’ subjective experiences.

The trajectory established by Boas, Sapir, and their students and colleagues in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, grounded linguistic anthropology firmly in the empirical investigation of a multiplicity of linguistic forms in a variety of social contexts, a direction that became refined and advanced in new ways in the decades that followed as anthropology burgeoned as a discipline. It is important to note that Boas and his students did so primarily through the study of language structure and use in American Indian communities who were struggling for survival as direct consequences of colonialism and genocide in the Americas (Scheper-Hughes 2001). This body of descriptively rich and fine-grained analysis was politically decontextualized from the lives and fates of American Indian communities living with the legacies of colonial nation-states. Nevertheless, it now provides linguistic and cultural data that disciplinary descendants (linguistic anthropologists) and genealogical descendants of anthropological “informants” are now returning to with new and critical perspectives in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. These recent returns to old linguistic anthropological analyses, in turn, are parts of broader indigenous cultural rights movements and heightened attention to reflexivity in anthropology (Silverstein 1996; Tomalin 2011).

## **2. Language, Discourse, Contexts: Ethnography and Semiotics**

In contrast to the emergence of linguistics as an autonomous discipline that abstracted language from its uses for formal analysis, linguistic anthropologists in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century worked to highlight ways that analysis of language must be grounded systematically in social contexts of production. They did so in order to show the ways that language use is of paramount importance to understanding cultural practices, social identities, belief systems, and community membership. This direction became richly developed by two complementary, yet distinct schools of thought and concomitant theoretical orientations for approaching the analysis of language in ethnographic contexts. Dell Hymes and John Gumperz pioneered the “ethnography of communication” and Michael Silverstein theorized a semiotic approach to questions of language use in social life. Taken together, ethnographic and semiotic approaches to language and culture remain the cornerstone of contemporary research in the field well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Dell Hymes and John Gumperz demonstrated the centrality of language to the anthropological endeavor and developed a framework for thoroughly investigating it in particular communities that tended to be small and rural in places as distinct as India, Norway, Colombia, Mexico, Senegal, and the United States (Gumperz 1964; Bauman and Sherzer 1974). They called for an empirical investigation of the multiplicity of

participants involved in a communicative moment (including speakers, listeners, signers, audiences, over-hearers, metaphysical entities), the interactants' goals, the genres of communication deployed, the physical and social setting of communicative events, the codes, registers, and dialects used in them, the social frame of the communicative event, and the culturally normative expectations for participation in them. These key components of ethnographies of communication highlighted the importance of language use for defining membership in local speech communities (Gumperz 1964) as well as for the successful performance of culturally-appropriate language use in specific contexts (Hymes 1964, 1972). In other words, this direction in linguistic anthropology stresses an understanding of language as a form of action—the *doing* of language by human actors along with the *constitutive role* language plays in social identity.

A precise understanding of the specific mechanisms by which language becomes a form of action that has multiple consequences in the world has been developed by Michael Silverstein's semiotic approach to the language and culture nexus. Drawing upon the insights of Prague school linguist, Ramon Jakobson (1960), Silverstein (1976) pointed to the multifunctionality of the linguistic sign and mobilized a Peircian (1932) model of signification to identify how linguistic forms and social functions become activated in discourse well beyond the purely referential to encapsulate multiple pragmatic meanings. In particular, Silverstein's theorization of Peirce's indexical sign has become key to the empirical mapping of meaning-making among social groups in specific cultural contexts, the cornerstone of linguistic anthropological research. An index is a kind of sign modality in which there is a co-occurrence in space or time between the sign vehicle and the entity which it is understood by a group to represent. To put it another way, the sign and the thing that it represents to a particular group "go together" in a given context. For example, what are colloquially referred to as regional "accents" become indexes of particular geographical areas in that linguistic forms of dialect variation (lexicon, phonology, morphology, and syntax) mark speakers among their interlocutors as people from a particular part of the world that is identifiable. Likewise, dialect and code variation often index age, generation, gender, sexual orientation, class, race, religion, and other collective forms of identity in myriad communities around the globe.

Of course, such assumptions of co-occurrence between features of discourse and cultural identifications are much more complicated, change over time, and can be strategically deployed for different ends by social actors. To analytically account for the historically-grounded as well as the interactionally dynamic aspects of language use and social meanings ascribed to them through semiotic processes, Silverstein makes the sharp and useful distinction between indexical presupposition and indexical creativity (1976). Indexical presupposition accounts for the history of language use, the commonplace assumptions about it, and the contextually established expected uses of linguistic forms and their concomitant social associations in a given context. Indexical creativity, however, allows analysts to demonstrate the emergent, contingent, and incipient changes that may happen when linguistic forms and their social meanings are in question or are in change. Silverstein puts it in the following way: "Adherence to the norms specified by rules of use reinforces the perceived social relations of speaker and hearer; violations constitute a powerful rebuff or insult, or go into the creation of irony and humor" (1976: 205). In this direction, honorifics, pronouns, other terms of reference and address used in discourse are rich sites for the empirical investigation of normative (indexically

presupposed) and transgressive (indexically creative) forms of language use (Agha 1994; Jacquemet 1994; French 2000) as are explorations of shifts in generic structure (Bauman and Briggs 1992), narrative (Briggs 1996; Reynolds 2010), and linguistic features indicating temporality (Wirtz 2007; Blayton 2011) deployed by individuals and social groups in specific ethnographic contexts.

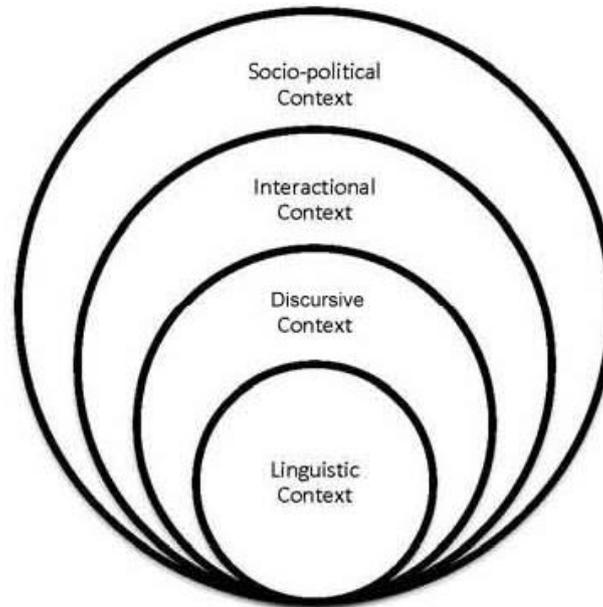


Figure 1. Layers of Empirical Analysis in Linguistic Anthropology

Taken together, empirical approaches developed by ethnography of communication scholars and semiotic approaches theorized by Periclan-informed linguistic anthropologists, provide a robust framework for the multilayered investigation of the ways in which social meanings are erected upon linguistic and discursive features that emerge in any given social context. To put it another way, a marriage of ethnographic and semiotic approaches in the anthropological study of language makes up the core of scholarly work in the field and directs us to the methodical analysis of meaning-making in embedded linguistic, discursive, interactional, social, and political contexts and relationships among them. (See Figure 1). Here, the notion of context refers to a layering of kinds of context that move from micro to macro levels and the dynamic and unfolding influences among them. The linguistic context refers to the immediate paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations in which a linguistic feature may or may not occur, such as the absence or presence of post-vocalic /r/ in varieties of spoken English or the use of one language among many code possibilities in a multilingual educational setting. The discursive context is the broader genre of language use or speech act within which a particular linguistic feature appears, such as turn-taking in a casual conversation among friends or a highly structured security interview at an international airport. The interactional context denotes the ethnographically-observed participants, social norms, strategic deployment of discourse in which generic features as well as linguistic features can be foregrounded or backgrounded by interlocutors. Attention to the immediate social context highlights the fields of solidarity, inequality, belonging, identity, epistemology that are operative in framing interactional moments that guide expectations and

interpretations of language use. The political context, which always, already imbricates all of the aforementioned layers of contextual analysis, brings to light explicitly the historical circumstances in which language and culture become overtly mobilized or self-consciously ignored by interested groups and institutions. National language policies, legislation against hate speech, and election oratory are but a few examples of this layer of context central to linguistic anthropological analysis. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a focus on politicized contexts in linguistic anthropology means there is a necessity for careful analytic attention to institutionalized structures of inequality along race, class, geographical, gendered, and geopolitical terms as well as attention to processes of war, genocide, transitional justice, human rights movements, indigenous rights movements, environmental justice efforts, and refugee crises when they are contextually salient to the study of the social uses of language.

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Mühlhäusler, P. (1995). The Interdependence of Linguistic and Biological Diversity, *The Politics of Multiculturalism in Asia/Pacific*. D. Meyers, ed. pp. 154-161. Darwin, Australia, Northern Territory Press. [This chapter provides the conceptual and analytic framework for linking different manifestations of diversity in the human and natural world.]

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Sanford, V. (2003). *Buried Secrets: Truth and Human Rights in Guatemala*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan. [This is an ethnography of genocide in Guatemala that places primacy on the voices and narratives of Maya survivors.]

Sapir, E. (1933). Language, *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, E. A. Seligman, ed., pp. 155-169. Macmillan Publishing Company. [This is a foundational piece in the development of linguistic anthropology.]

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processes of Sapir's research with McGuff. In so doing, it returns to the history of linguistic anthropology with new insights from a semiotic, discourse-centered perspective.]

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Spitulnik, D. (1996). The Social Circulation of Media Discourse and the Mediation of Communities, *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 6(2), 161-187. [This article takes up the construction of national identity through the circulation of discourse in media in Zambia.]

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United Nations Educational Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Endangered Languages Programme. Available at <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/endangered-languages/> Accessed 11/6/2104 [This is a searchable and interactive data base of language endangerment around the globe.]

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Warren, K.B., J.E. Jackson, eds. (2002). *Indigenous Movements, Self-Representation and the State in Latin America*, Austin, University of Texas Press. [This book draws examples of indigenous movements from throughout Latin America. Several of the chapters take up language politics as one avenue.]

Webster, A.K. (2010). Imagining Navajo in the Boarding School: Laura Tohe's No Parole Today and the Intimacy of Language Ideologies, *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 20(1), 39-62. [This article looks at contemporary Navajo poetry and expressive culture as a site for the production of language ideologies and social memories.]

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Zenker, O. (2014). Linguistic Relativity and Dialectical Idiomatization: Language Ideologies and Second Language Acquisition in the Irish Language Revival of Northern Ireland, *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 24(1), 63-83. [This article deals with language revitalization and linguistic ideologies among a political minority in Northern Ireland.]

Zentella, A.C. (1997). *Growing up Bilingual*, Malden, MA, Wiley-Blackwell. [This is an ethnography and sociolinguistic analysis of bilingualism among New York Puerto Rican children.]

### **Biographical Sketch**

**Brigitte French** earned a PhD in anthropology from the University of Iowa in 2001. She is Associate Professor of Anthropology at Grinnell College where she has been a faculty member since 2003. French is the author of *Maya Ethnolinguistic Identity: Violence, Cultural Rights and Modernity in Highland Guatemala* (2010) published by University of Arizona which is based upon her ethnographic work among Maya-Kaqchikel and K'iche' communities. Her recent work has appeared in the *Journal of Human Rights*, *American Anthropologist*, *Language in Society*, and *Annual Review of Anthropology*, among others. She was a Fulbright Fellow at Dublin City University in the School of Applied Languages and Intercultural Studies in 2012 and is currently working on a project that examines the language of conflict in post-civil war Ireland.