

HISTORY OF LINGUISTIC ANTHROPOLOGY

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Contents

1. Introduction
 2. The First Paradigm: The Boasian Tradition
 3. The Second Paradigm: The Ethnography of Communication and the Birth of Sociolinguistics
 4. New Directions of Research: Language Socialization, Indexicality, and Heteroglossia
 5. A Third Paradigm: Language as a Flux of Indexical Values
 6. Conclusion
- Glossary
Bibliography
Biographical Sketch

Summary

The field of linguistic anthropology was born in the United States and Canada at the beginning of the twentieth century as one of the four fields of North American anthropology. At first it was mainly focused on the documentation of aboriginal languages (especially in North America) and grammatical structures. Later it became more concerned with language-mediated activities and the relationship between language and context. The chapter uses Thomas Kuhn's paradigm shift framework to discuss how goals, key concepts, units of analysis, issues, and methods have changed over the last one hundred years without necessarily replacing older paradigms. The first paradigm emerged with the pioneering work of Franz Boas on American Indian languages and continues today in the descriptive work of so-called "field linguists," who are committed to writing grammars of previously undocumented aboriginal languages around the world. This paradigm persists today in much of so-called cognitively oriented linguistics (and cognitive oriented anthropologists) especially with regard to their interest in language as a resource for the encoding of experience. With the emergence of the second paradigm, language came to be conceived of as a variable entity that is sensitive to context and at the same time structures context. The second paradigm coincides with the ethnography of communication and interactional sociolinguistics. Many of the scholars involved in the second paradigm have been influential in developing what is considered here to be a third paradigm, which has expanded and challenged previous conceptualizations of language and its role in the construction of identities, institutions, and communities. Through the development of new areas of research (e.g. language socialization) and the adoption and further elaboration of concepts such as indexicality, heteroglossia and agency, those in the third paradigm have established a closer connection with contemporary social theory. Despite

the differences across periods, schools, and authors, the general goal of the discipline has remained the same: the definition of what constitutes an understanding of language from an anthropological point of view.

1. Introduction

Linguistic anthropology is an interdisciplinary field dedicated to the study of language from an anthropological perspective. This means that, over the years, linguistic anthropologists have regarded language as a sophisticated sign system that contributes to the constitution of society and the reproduction of specific cultural practices. In addition to being a powerful tool for exchanging information, language has been shown to play a crucial role in the classification of experience, the identification of people, things, ideas, and emotions, the recounting of the past and the imagining of the future that is so critical for joint activities and problem solving.

Over the last one hundred years, linguistic anthropologists have been engaged in such diverse tasks as the documentation and analysis of specific languages or language varieties (from Native American languages starting in the 19th century to dialects of English starting in the mid-20th century), the study of linguistic genres (e.g. narratives, oratorical speeches, curing formulas, prayers, gossip) and registers (e.g. baby talk, men's talk, women's talk, radio talk, classroom talk), and the refinement of theoretical concepts such as indexicality, iconicity, participation, and ideology and agency. In these tasks, linguistic anthropologists have used a variety of methods, including grammatical analysis of texts and grammatical forms elicited from native speakers and interactional analysis of audio and video recording of speech events. The very notion of transcription has thus evolved over time from covering the phonetic characterization of what someone said, to providing a dynamic representation of the multi-modal nature of communication in face-to-face interaction (i.e. the simultaneous use of verbal and non-verbal channels, the reliance on various artifacts and technologies).

As an interdisciplinary field, linguistic anthropology has often drawn from and contributed to the development of a variety of research traditions including descriptive, formal, historical, and typological linguistics, folklore, language acquisition, literacy studies, sign language studies, literary criticism, philosophy of language, social theory, gender studies, cultural and clinical psychology, and narrative analysis. This history of intellectual interconnections and collaborations is partly reflected in the alternation among four labels for what some might see as the same field: linguistic anthropology, anthropological linguistics, ethnolinguistics, and sociolinguistics. Part of the difficulty of agreeing on the name of what is being described here as "linguistic anthropology", is due to the fact that, over the years, the discipline has changed or, rather, expanded its focus, methods, and theoretical orientation. From an almost exclusive interest in the documentation of the grammars of aboriginal languages in North America and other continents, linguistic anthropology has moved to the uses of speaking across social contexts and throughout individuals' life spans. This chapter provides a brief historical account of such changes by means of the notion of paradigm shift. It is argued that the entire history of the discipline of linguistic anthropology can be described in terms of two paradigm shifts and the resulting three paradigms. The first paradigm starts with "salvage anthropology" and the contributions made by Franz Boas, his students, and his

students' students. This work is characterized by a strong commitment to the documentation and understanding of linguistic diversity as represented by the thousands of languages that were still in need of a systematic description at the beginning of the twentieth century. The second paradigm arose mostly due to the efforts of John Gumperz and Dell Hymes in the early 1960s to focus on the relationship between language and the contexts of its use. It roughly coincides with the approach they called 'the ethnography of communication' and it has strong affinities with urban sociolinguistics as practiced by William Labov and his students. The third paradigm is represented by research that, starting in the 1980s, focuses on language as used in socialization, negotiation of identities, power struggles, and the constitution of heterogeneous communities.

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Biographical Sketch

Alessandro Duranti is Professor of Anthropology at the University of California, Los Angeles and Director of the Center for Language, Interaction and Culture (CLIC). His main areas of interest include political discourse, intentionality, the expression of agency in natural languages, universals of greetings, and the culture of jazz aesthetics. His books include *From Grammar to Politics: Linguistic Anthropology in a Western Samoan Village* (The University of California Press, 1994), *Linguistic Anthropology* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), *Linguistic Anthropology: A Reader* (Blackwell, 2001), and *A Companion to Linguistic Anthropology* (Blackwell, 2004).