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General introduction

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Overview of the volume

This volume examines the nature and significance of the reflexive aspect of natural language. Through theoretical statements, empirical studies, and programmatic applications, the volume explores in detail the formal and functional operation of linguistic reflexivity. Both individually and collectively the studies seek to indicate the significance of such detailed work on language for an adequate understanding of the broader contours of human life. We hope to encourage broader and deeper attention to the reflexive aspect of natural language and its significance not only for studies of language structure and use but also for all research in the humanities and social sciences which deals extensively with language materials.

Language provides a powerful tool for representing and characterizing the world, and much of human activity consists of using linguistic utterances to effect certain actions. When, therefore, as scholars, we undertake to develop accounts of human life, one of our central tasks must be to characterize the use of language. This use depends in crucial ways on the reflexive capacity of language, that is, the capacity of language to represent its own structure and use, including the everyday metalinguistic activities of reporting, characterizing, and commenting on speech. The chapters in this volume explore the implementation, power, and limits of this reflexive capacity.

But the accounts developed in these chapters themselves make use of reflexive language as they formulate verbal statements about verbal activities. On the one hand, the very possibility of such scholarly accounts depends intimately on the specialized development of the reflexive capacity of ordinary language. On the other hand, our investigations often share with everyday metalinguistic activities whatever limitations they may exhibit – universal or culture-specific. In short, scholarly discourse is both enabled and limited by its connections with everyday metalinguistic practices, and a methodological grounding of scholarly practice must begin with a careful examination of everyday metalinguistic activities. Most of the chapters in this volume also explore this second, self-critical dimension of the reflexive use

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 John A. Lucy

of language, that is, its significance for the practice of research in the human disciplines.

Theoretical and methodological themes

The volume will focus on explicit cases of reflexivity, that is, speech forms and events which clearly foreground metalinguistic activity. Among the most important such explicitly reflexive activities is *reported speech*, speech which purportedly re-presents another specific speech event. Reported speech has been much studied and provides one core empirical focus for the volume. But there are many other explicit reflexive uses of language, such as when a speaker characterizes or comments on some regularity or pattern of speech use. If we refer to such regularities of speech use as *pragmatics*, then all such reflexive activity can be called *metapragmatics*. The broader focus of the volume then is on the whole gamut of explicit metapragmatic speech patterns – with reported speech representing a particularly salient type within an array of possibilities.

From a theoretical point of view, the studies presented here emphasize three themes. First, ordinary language structure and practice depends in crucial ways on the existence of metalinguistic forms and practices. The ability to constitute an utterance and its structure as object and situate it into a social situation lies at the core of the structure and use of language. Second, explicit reflexive discourse (or metapragmatics) is always implemented out of ordinary language and has its own pragmatics, which varies according to the specific language and culture from which it arises. It is therefore subject to certain predictable limitations, that is, the reflexive activity itself cannot be privileged as somehow free of linguistic, cultural, or contextual influences even though speakers may attempt to ignore or overcome such limitations. Third, any reflexive discourse must solve the formal problem of indicating which utterances or portions of utterances are operating at the metalevel and which are being reflected on or situated. Once in place, such boundaries can be manipulated to produce creative effects, including, for example, the aforementioned attempts to circumvent various universal and culture-specific limitations on reflexive language use.

From a methodological point of view, the studies presented here share certain common features. First, they are comparative. Metalinguistic activity like all linguistic activity is fundamentally cultural in nature and its cultural specificity must be examined in formulating theory. Naturally occurring metalinguistic activities are examined as they vary both diachronically – in ontogenesis and history – and synchronically – across and within cultures.

Second, the approach is interdisciplinary. On the one hand, each of the chapters is grounded in a specific linguistic (or semiotic) approach and systematically develops a detailed linguistic analysis. The engagement with language is substantive. On the other hand, each study treats linguistic practices with reference to some second set of concerns. In most of the chapters the second set of concerns is anthropological, and an anthropological perspective on language predominates in the volume. Also represented, however, are chapters dealing with psychology, folklore, religion, literature,

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[More information](#)

and philosophy. Behind this interdisciplinary approach is the view that reflexive uses of language permeate all aspects of human activity and provide a useful point of contact and dialogue across a wide range of disciplines.

Finally, many of the chapters are critical of aspects of current scientific practice. In the 1970s and 1980s discussion of the limitations of the Western scientific enterprise has become sharper as new voices concerned with cultural, social-class, and gender biases have challenged traditional assumptions and foregrounded the unreflective and unreflexive character of much current research. Virtually every academic discipline concerned with human studies has been touched by this outpouring of reflexive and self-critical inquiries. In the main, however, these inquiries remain at the level of content, clarifying how a given bias on the part of researchers has resulted in certain empirical or theoretical errors. But beyond these sorts of criticisms lie more general, formal concerns about the very possibility of meaningful inquiry and the viability of some of the methodological assumptions of the Western scientific tradition. At the deepest level, the current volume represents a contribution to articulating the possibility and eventual form of an adequate human science by highlighting the mechanisms, possibilities, and constraints operating in reflexive activities that depend, ultimately, on the reflexive use of language.

Organization of the volume

Part I, “Theoretical foundations,” presents two chapters providing theoretical background for the volume. Lucy introduces some of the basic concepts and approaches being used in research in this area and explains the general significance of the concern for language and metalanguage within the human disciplines. Silverstein develops a formal statement of the central theoretical issues at stake in a theory of metacommunicative practice.

Part II, “The relation of form and function in reflexive language,” explores the problem of how the two levels of functioning in a reflexive utterance are formally separated and apprehended by speakers. The first two chapters deal with naturally occurring techniques for reporting speech and separating metalinguistic usage from ordinary usage. Hickmann traces the emergence in English-speaking children of the capacity to separate reported speech from reporting speech. Lucy discusses the functioning of one technique of framing reported speech in the Yucatec Maya language, a technique which allows speakers to circumvent a common constraint on metalinguistic activity. The second two chapters deal with the conceptual and practical difficulties of getting informants in a field setting to characterize certain kinds of linguistic forms important in our own theoretical discourse. Hanks looks at the problems Yucatec Mayan informants have and the techniques they use in discussing deictic terms in their language. Mertz explores the problems of interviewing English–Gaelic bilinguals about code-switching practices because of differences between her understandings of language and those of her informants.

Part III, “Text, context, and the cultural functions of reflexive language,” explores

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0521351642 - Reflexive language: Reported Speech and Metapragmatics

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 John A. Lucy

the cultural significance of reflexive language and the pragmatic effects which can be obtained by creative manipulation of the boundary between reported speech and current speech, between text and context. The first two chapters focus on multiple performances of the “same” text in order to explore the interaction of text and performance context. Briggs analyzes three types of Warao narrative performance to show how participants’ metapragmatic understandings fix a characteristic relationship between narrated (or verbally entextualized) and narrating (or contextualized signaling) events for each performance type. Moore’s chapter on Chinookan myths describes the relative stability of reported speech across five performances while the framing material shows significant adjustments to the performance context – including the presence of the linguist. The second two chapters deal with the broader cultural functions of reflexive language. In an analysis of Shokleng myths, Urban shows how the reflexive properties of language can be used to represent normative cultural values about the proper use of speech and so serve to preserve cultural continuity. Parmentier discusses a particular Belauan political speech which by creative report and commentary on speech attempts to effect a significant cultural transformation.

Part IV, “Interpretation, reported speech, and metapragmatics in the Western tradition,” examines the significance of an understanding of reported speech and metapragmatics for several scholarly traditions developed in the West. The first two chapters deal with explicitly psychological theories. Crapanzano discusses the implications of a more sophisticated conceptualization of metalanguage for understanding Freud’s psychoanalytic theory and practice. Caton reanalyzes George Herbert Mead’s social psychology in light of a more adequate theory of metalinguistic awareness. The next two chapters deal with the linkage between literature and epistemology by exploring the causes and consequences of new modes of representing speech and thought in the West. Banfield traces the emergence of quasi-direct discourse in European literature and links it to the possibilities of new conceptions of consciousness. Lee contrasts these same developments in the literary sphere to others in Western philosophy to illuminate the emergence of certain modern understandings of subjectivity. Finally, Janowitz explores the effects of contrasting linguistic ideologies within the Judeo-Christian religious tradition on the exegetical interpretation, canonization, and incorporation of earlier texts.

More detailed discussions of the themes of each section are articulated in the introductions to the various Parts of the volume.

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[More information](#)

PART I

Theoretical foundations

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0521351642 - Reflexive language: Reported Speech and Metapragmatics

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Introduction to Part I

Part I, “Theoretical foundations,” provides contextual and theoretical background for the volume. In Chapter 1, Lucy provides a general, nontechnical overview of existing research on reflexive language. He first illustrates the range of language forms and uses that have been seen as reflexive. Then he outlines the distinctive orientations and contributions of three major research traditions which have explored this reflexivity. The logico-linguistic tradition formulates a metalanguage/object language distinction to resolve difficulties in the philosophical analysis of the truth value of symbolic referential uses of language. The semiotic-functional tradition foregrounds the centrality of metacommunicative framing for all language use. And the literary-performance approaches emphasize the use of reflexivity in language and especially in verbal art to establish and transform existing contexts. *En route*, many of the basic concepts and theoretical ideas employed in other papers in the volume are clarified and located conceptually and historically. The chapter concludes by indicating the broader significance of studies of reflexive language within the human disciplines. This discussion focuses in particular on the significance of various semiotic limits to awareness and their implications for research in the human disciplines.

In Chapter 2, Silverstein, building on his previous work, develops a formal statement of the various theoretical issues at stake in a theory of metasemiotic practice. He characterizes such activity in terms of three broad dimensions: the nature of the object of metasemiosis, the formal regimentation of the metasemiotic signal itself, and the constituted relation of the metasemiotic event to the object of metasemiosis. With regard to the object of metasemiosis we must distinguish whether it involves semantics, in which case we have metasemantics, or whether it involves pragmatics, in which case we have metapragmatics. The formal regimentation of the metasemiotic signal can be characterized in terms of its degree of denotational explicitness. Finally, speakers may construe (or calibrate) the object of metasemiosis as an event distinct from the metasemantic signaling (reportative calibration), as the occurring event itself (reflexive calibration), or as from another epistemic realm such as the mythic, systematic-typical, or sacred (nomic calibration). The dialectical interaction of metalanguage/metacommunication and language/communication along all three dimensions provides insight into how native speakers creatively actualize and interpret discourse.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

1

Reflexive language and the human disciplines

JOHN A. LUCY

What prevents a work from being completed becomes the work itself.

Marcus Aurelius

Human activity is saturated by speech and much of what is distinctive about the human species depends on the use of language. Yet it is not easy to specify exactly what it is about language that is so special. One aspect of language that has drawn extensive attention in this regard is its reflexive capacity: in its full form this property may be unique to human language (Hockett 1963: 13; Lyons 1977: 5; Silverstein 1976: 16). This reflexive capacity underlies much of the power of language both in everyday life and in scholarly research. A theoretical account of this reflexive capacity will be necessary, therefore, for progress in many of the human disciplines.

A number of approaches to the study of reflexive language have already been developed, but the general significance of this work has not been widely appreciated. The present chapter briefly surveys some of the forms of reflexivity in language, outlines how these have been approached by some prominent research traditions, and then explores the place of research on reflexive language in the human disciplines with special attention to its methodological implications for the research process itself.

Types of reflexive language

In every language it is possible to speak about speech, that is, to use language to communicate about the activity of using language. Such uses of language are *reflexive* in nature. Reflexive use of language may involve two distinct, named language codes (e.g., a comment in English about Chinese) or the reflexivity may operate more narrowly within a single such code (e.g., a comment in English about English). In the latter case, the same language is operating simultaneously in two functional modes as it serves as both the means and the object of communication.

A variety of types of linguistic reflexivity can be identified. Firstly, we may refer to

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

10 John A. Lucy

general regularities in the structure or functioning of language use (e.g., “*Get* is an irregular verb,” “*Cilantro* is another name for *coriander*,” “One shouldn’t say ‘damn it’ in front of children,” “Spanish consonants are pronounced slightly differently in Mexico than in Spain,” “A joke is a kind of humorous story”). We may even talk about language in general (e.g., “Many languages signal gender differences in their pronouns,” “Languages are capable of referring to their own structure and use”). Secondly, we may refer to or report particular acts of speech (real or imagined) in a variety of ways: by representing most of the speech as we remember or imagine it having happened (e.g., “He said ‘Hey, that’s a great haircut you got!’”), by representing part of the speech (e.g., “He said [that] I got a great haircut”), by characterizing the speech without overtly representing it (e.g., “Tom complimented me today,” “Bill told a joke at lunch”), or by some mixture of characterization and representation (e.g., “Tom complimented me today on how great my haircut was”). Perhaps because of their relative clarity, these two forms of reflexivity (i.e., overt reference to language regularities and reports of particular speech events) have been the main focus of research interest to date, but they do not exhaust the forms of reflexivity in language.

Within a given linguistic code, language use is reflexive in a variety of other ways. For example, all languages contain indexical forms which change their value depending on the actual event of speaking. In order to understand these forms a person needs to be able to compute the parameters of the use of language in a specific context. For example, the denotational meaning of the pronoun *I* depends on knowing the identity of ‘the person uttering an instance of *I*,’ that is, the form indexes an aspect of the specific speech event itself (an instance of language use) as part of its meaning and is, in this sense, reflexive. So too for other forms such as tense markers on verbs (e.g., English *-ed*, ‘past,’ which indicates that the event in question occurred prior to the present moment of utterance). These forms reflexively take account of the ongoing event of speaking itself, in terms of which we can use and understand their referential and predicational value. Still other forms are defined essentially with respect to regularities in the use of language code. For example, a proper name, in the pure case, denotes anything to which the name is assigned by convention. That is, in the pure case, a proper name denotes a particular object not by virtue of signaling some substantive information about its properties but only by indexing the existence of a conventional label for that specific object – that the object is so named. In just this sense, such names are reflexive in nature.

In addition to the above types of reflexive forms, there are a whole variety of other structural devices which also tell listeners how to interpret the speech they are hearing. In some languages, it is possible to help create an event centering on speech by explicit description of the particular speech event regularity as it occurs (e.g., “I baptize you John Henry”). Likewise, altering one’s intonational contour can tell a listener not to take a remark literally (e.g., [with a sarcastic intonation] “Hey, that’s a great haircut you got”). The reflexivity in such cases is not localized in a single form but rather in an overall design of the utterance. In a like manner, structural parallelism in poetry sets up formal equivalences that tell listeners that certain things are to be compared

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

with one another. Again, a constellation of textual features tells listeners how to interpret the ongoing speech. Indeed, to the extent that specific textual co-occurrences – even those based on grammatical patterns – have meaning value, they perform a similar guiding function. The orderly array of elements may guide speakers in their interpretation of an utterance. For instance, where there are regular word order patterns which place elements with an agentive role in initial position relative to the propositional utterance as a whole, then placing an item in that position signals to the listener that it is to be taken as the agent. In this sense, one part of the code structures the interpretation of another part.

In sum, speech is permeated by reflexive activity as speakers remark on language, report utterances, index and describe aspects of the speech event, invoke conventional names, and guide listeners in the proper interpretation of their utterances. This reflexivity is so pervasive and essential that we can say that language is, by nature, fundamentally reflexive.

Traditional approaches to reflexive language

These various forms of reflexive language have been explored from several different disciplinary and theoretical perspectives. Several of the historically significant problems and prominent approaches to them will be briefly sketched here with an emphasis on introducing certain important conceptual distinctions.

Logico-linguistic approaches

Philosophical interest in language stems in large part from the latter's perceived relation to logic and truth. In particular, logicians and philosophical semanticists have been concerned to specify the conditions under which one can validly derive new propositions which are true from propositions whose truth is already given. These philosophers have long recognized that some linguistic forms can be used reflexively to refer to themselves, and they have devoted considerable attention to reflexive forms for two reasons. First, the presence of reflexive forms in an utterance often derails the usual derivations of true propositions (Quine 1960: Chs. 4 & 6). Secondly, philosophers have come to recognize that their own claims about terms and propositions are themselves reflexive; in particular, the claim in a language that a proposition in that language is "true" is a reflexive statement (Tarski 1944; Reichenbach 1975 [1947]).

In general, philosophical attention has centered on the most explicit forms of reflexivity illustrated above: reference to language regularities and reports of speech. Turning first to statements about language, these tend to be reflexive in several ways. The most obvious reflexivity involves denoting a particular form in the language. For example, in the statement "dog is monosyllabic" the form *dog* refers not to an animal but rather to itself as a linguistic form: it serves here as its own name. When *dog* is used in this way, it no longer has its usual referential value (it is not referentially transparent) and it is not possible to draw the usual inferences from it; that is, we

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

12 John A. Lucy

cannot conclude anything about dogs from the utterance. Notice, in particular, that if we substitute the word *canine* for *dog*, the statement becomes false even though most other ordinary statements about dogs would have the same referential value under such a substitution. Seeking to distinguish normal and reflexive reference, philosophers have employed the term *use* for the ordinary case and *mention* for the self-referential case (e.g., Quine 1940: 23–6). (Garver 1965 and Lyons 1977: 5–10 provide some criticisms of this distinction and references to the relevant literature.)

The reflexive status of *dog* in the above example would be clear to most speakers of English by virtue of the specialized meaning value of the term *monosyllabic*, whose primary function is to ascribe states to language forms. However, we can further clarify the reflexive status of *dog* by saying, for example, “The word *dog* is monosyllabic” – employing another special term *word* to signal directly that *dog* is now being referred to as a language form, that is, is now being used reflexively. (And in written texts we might find other forms of special visual marking such as italics or quotation marks: “[The word] *dog* is monosyllabic” or “[The word] ‘dog’ is monosyllabic”.) These various special forms, so essential to modern philosophical and linguistic discourse, effectively refer to and/or predicate of other forms in language. As forms, they are not narrowly reflexive in the sense of referring to themselves (unless they are “mentioned” in the sense introduced above), but rather they facilitate the reflexive use of language generally. Their status is not really captured by the use-versus-mention distinction and a somewhat broader conceptualization seems needed to adequately characterize them.

In many traditional philosophical and linguistic accounts, ordinary language is conceived of as referring, in the first instance, to a world of nonlinguistic objects. The use of language to refer to language itself is seen, then, as a higher order or iterative use worthy of special attention. Language referring to language in this way is called *metalanguage* and the ordinary language referred to is called *object language*. For some theorists, use of the term *object language* specifically indicates that the first order language deals with actual objects of one sort or another (e.g., Reichenbach 1975 [1947]: 14; cf. Jakobson 1980a [1956]: 86), whereas for others, it is just a relational term in contrast to metalanguage (e.g., Lyons 1977: 10). In either case, all of the above forms can be characterized as metalinguistic and “mention” is, then, just a particular type of metalinguistic pattern. And in both cases there can be higher order metalanguages about a first order metalanguage. Although the argument cannot be developed here, Reichenbach (1975 [1947]: 9–17) and others differentiate several levels within metalanguage depending on the aspect of object language to which they refer and the scope of generality involved.

One particularly troublesome question in this tradition concerns the autonomy of metalanguages. On the one hand, many if not most languages contain a number of specialized metalinguistic forms, so the metalanguage seems at times to operate as a separate code. Yet in the case of terms which are “mentioned,” the forms are clearly identical to or based on those of the object language. Further, some forms such as *is* seem to be duplex in that they can serve in both object language (e.g., “The dog is brown”) and metalanguage (e.g., “Dog is a noun”). In the narrowly reflexive case,