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The scope of linguistic anthropology

This book starts from the assumption that linguistic anthropology is a distinct discipline that deserves to be studied for its past accomplishments as much as for the vision of the future presented in the work of a relatively small but active group of interdisciplinary researchers. Their contributions on the nature of language as a social tool and speaking as a cultural practice have established a domain of inquiry that makes new sense of past and current traditions in the humanities and the social sciences and invites everyone to rethink the relationship between language and culture.

To say that linguistic anthropology is an interdisciplinary field means that it draws a great deal from other, independently established disciplines and in particular from the two from which its name is formed: linguistics and anthropology. In this chapter, I will introduce some aspects of this intellectual heritage – other aspects will be discussed in more depth later in the book. I will also begin to show how, over the last few decades, the field of linguistic anthropology has developed an intellectual identity of its own. It is the primary goal of this book to describe this identity and to explain how it can enhance our understanding of language not only as a mode of thinking but, above all, as a cultural practice, that is, as a form of action that both presupposes and at the same time brings about ways of being in the world. It is only in the context of such a view of language that linguistic anthropology can creatively continue to influence the fields from which it draws while making its own unique contribution to our understanding of what it means to be human.

1.1 Definitions

Since the term **linguistic anthropology** (and its variant **anthropological linguistics**)[1] is currently understood in a variety of ways, it is important to clarify the way

[1] The two terms "linguistic anthropology" and "anthropological linguistics" have been used in the past more or less interchangeably and any attempt to trace back semantic or

in which it will be used in this book. Engaging in this task at the beginning puts me in a somewhat difficult position given that the entire book is dedicated to the definition of the field and therefore I could never hope to do justice to its many aspects and subfields in a few introductory remarks. At the same time, it is important to recognize the need to give a first, however sketchy, idea of the type of enterprise pursued by the discipline described in this book. I will thus start with a brief definition of the field of linguistic anthropology and will then proceed to expand and clarify its apparent simplicity in the rest of this chapter. I should mention at this point that much of what I will discuss in this book has also been called **ethnolinguistics**, a term that enjoyed only a limited popularity in the US in the late 1940s and early 1950s (Olmsted 1950; Garvin and Riesenberg 1952), but has been quite common in European scholarship,[2] perhaps following the general preference, up to recently, in Continental Europe for "ethnology" and its cognates over "anthropology."[3] As will become clear in the rest of this chapter, my choice of "linguistic anthropology" over both "anthropological linguistics" and "ethnolinguistics" is part of a conscious attempt at consolidating and redefining the study of language and culture as one of the major subfields of anthropology. This view of the field was clearly stated by Hymes (1963: 277), when he defined it as "*the study of speech and language within the context of anthropology*."

Simply stated, in this book linguistic anthropology will be presented as *the study of language as a cultural resource and speaking as a cultural practice*. As an

practical distinctions risks rewriting history. Hymes tried to stabilize the use of the term linguistic anthropology in a number of essays in the early 1960s (Hymes 1963, 1964c). But even Hymes, as scrupulous an historian as he is, can be found alternating between the two. In *Language in Culture and Society*, he uses "linguistic anthropology" when defining the field in the introduction (Hymes 1964a: xxiii) – see also note 6 below – and both "linguistic anthropology" and "anthropological linguists" when discussing Boas's influence: "Boas and other shapers of linguistic anthropology in America ..." and, in the next paragraph, "Boas et al. (1916) defines a style that characterizes the field work of both Boas and a generation or more of American anthropological linguists" (p. 23).

[2] Cardona (1973, reprinted in 1990: 13–44) mentions several cognates of the English *ethnolinguistics* in other European languages, such as the Russian *ètnolingvistika*, the French *ethnolinguistique*, the German *Ethnolinguistik*, the Spanish *etnolingüística*, and the Portuguese *etnolinguística*. Cardona himself eventually followed this European trend by abandoning *linguistica antropologica* in favor of *etnolinguistica* in his introduction to the field (Cardona 1976).

[3] Malinowski used the term *ethno-linguistic* in his early writings: "there is an urgent need for an ethno-linguistic theory, a theory for the guidance of linguistic research to be done among natives and in connection with ethnographic study" (1920: 69).

inherently interdisciplinary field, it relies on and expands existing methods in other disciplines, linguistics and anthropology in particular, with the general goal of providing an understanding of the multifarious aspects of language as a set of cultural practices, that is, as a system of communication that allows for interpsychological (between individuals) and intrapsychological (in the same individual) representations of the social order and helps people use such representations for constitutive social acts. Inspired by the work of a number of leading anthropologists in the first half of this century who made language a central theoretical concern and an indispensable tool of cultural anthropology, linguistic anthropologists work at producing ethnographically grounded accounts of linguistic structures as used by real people in real time and real space. This means that linguistic anthropologists see the subjects of their study, that is, **speakers**, first and above all as **social actors**, that is, members of particular, interestingly complex, communities, each organized in a variety of social institutions and through a network of intersecting but not necessarily overlapping sets of expectations, beliefs, and moral values about the world.

Contrary to earlier definitions of the field and some commonsense understanding of the term by non-practitioners, linguistic anthropology in this book is not synonymous with just *any* study of language done by anthropologists. Nor is it equivalent to the collection of "exotic" texts studied by anthropologists – texts, that is, usually produced by members of technologically less advanced, non-literate societies.[4] The act of providing a written account of some aspects of the grammar of a language spoken by a people without writing – in the Brazilian jungle or in the Kalahari desert – does not qualify someone as a linguistic anthropologist. It is rather specific goals and methods that distinguish a linguistic anthropology project from a linguistic study or survey, on the one hand, and from an ethnographic account on the other.

What distinguishes linguistic anthropologists from other students of language is not only the interest in language use – a perspective that is shared by other researchers, dialectologists and sociolinguists in particular (Hudson 1980) –, but their focus on language as a set of symbolic resources that enter the constitution of social fabric and the individual representation of actual or possible worlds. Such a focus allows linguistic anthropologists to address in innovative ways some of the issues and topics that are at the core of anthropological research such as the politics of representation, the constitution of authority, the legitimation of

[4] My position here is in sharp contrast with Hoijer's (1961: 110) definition of anthropological linguistics as "... an area of research which is devoted in the main to studies, synchronic and diachronic, of the languages of the people who have no writing."

power, the cultural basis of racism and ethnic conflict, the process of socialization, the cultural construction of the person (or self), the politics of emotion, the relationship between ritual performance and forms of social control, domain-specific knowledge and cognition, artistic performance and the politics of aesthetic consumption, cultural contact and social change.

Linguistic anthropology is often presented as one of the four traditional branches of anthropology (the others being archaeological, biological or physical, and sociocultural anthropology[5]). However, being an anthropologist and working on language are two conditions that do not necessarily qualify someone as a linguistic anthropologist. It is in fact quite possible to be an anthropologist and produce a grammatical description of a language that has little or nothing to offer to linguistic anthropological theory and methods. Linguistic anthropology must be viewed as part of the wider field of anthropology not because it is a kind of linguistics practiced in anthropology departments, but because it examines language through the lenses of anthropological concerns. These concerns include the transmission and reproduction of culture, the relationship between cultural systems and different forms of social organization, and the role of the material conditions of existence in a people's understanding of the world. This view of linguistic anthropology, however, does not mean that its research questions must always be shaped by the other subfields in anthropology. On the contrary, the very existence of an independent field of linguistic anthropology is justified only to the extent to which it can set its own agenda, which is informed by anthropological issues but needs not be led exclusively by such issues.[6] In particular, as I will discuss below, not all views of culture within sociocultural anthropology are equally conducive to the dynamic and complex notion of language presently assumed by most linguistic anthropologists. Many cultural anthropologists continue to see language primarily as a system of classification and representation and when linguistic forms are used in ethnographies, they tend to be used as labels for some independently established meanings. Linguistic anthropologists, on the other hand, have been stressing a view of language as a set of practices, which play an essential role in mediating the ideational and material aspects of

[5] For the purpose of this discussion I am conflating the distinction that is at times made between social anthropology – which is concerned with the reproduction of particular social systems – and cultural anthropology – which is the study of the more cognitively oriented notions of culture proposed by Boas and his students.

[6] I am here reformulating an earlier definition given by Hymes (1964a: xxiii): "In one sense, [linguistic anthropology] is a characteristic activity, the activity of those whose questions about language are shaped by anthropology ... Its scope may include problems that fall outside the active concern of linguistics, and *always it uniquely includes the problem of integration with the rest of anthropology*."

human existence and, hence, in bringing about particular ways of being-in-the-world. It is such a dynamic view of language that gives linguistic anthropology its unique place in the humanities and the social sciences.

1.2 The study of linguistic practices

As a domain of inquiry, linguistic anthropology starts from the theoretical assumption that words matter and from the empirical finding that linguistic signs as representations of the world and connections to the world are never neutral; they are constantly used for the construction of cultural affinities and cultural differentiations. The great success of structuralism in linguistics, anthropology, and other social sciences can be partly explained by the fact that so much of interpretation is a process of comparison and hence entails differentiation. What linguistic anthropologists add to this fundamental intuition is that differences do not just live in the symbolic codes that represent them. Differences are not just due to the substitution of a sound with another (/pit/ vs. /bit/) or of a word with another (*a big fan of yours* vs. *a big dog of yours*). Differences also live through concrete acts of speaking, the mixing of words with actions, and the substitution of words *for* action. It is from structuralists that we learned to pay attention to what is not said, to the alternative questions and the alternative answers, to the often dispreferred and yet possible and hence meaningful silence (Basso 1972; Bauman 1983). When we think about what is said in contrast with what is not said, we set up a background against which to evaluate the said (Tyler 1978). But how wide and how deep should we search? How many levels of analysis are sufficient? This is not just a question about the number of utterances, speakers, and languages that should be studied. It is about the function of ethnography, its merits and limits. It is about the range of phenomena that we take as relevant to what language is and does. Such a range is infinitely wide but *de facto* constrained by human action and human understanding. We can't think about the whole world at once and much of the work done by linguistic anthropologists is about the ways in which the words said on a given occasion give participants first and researchers later a point of view, a way of thinking about the world and the nature of human existence. As pointed out by the great philosophers of the past, humans are the only creatures who think about themselves thinking. Such an awareness is closely connected with symbolic representation and hence with the language faculty. But language is more than a reflective tool whereby we try to make sense of our thoughts and actions. Through language use we also enter an interactional space that has been partly already shaped for us, a world in which some distinctions seem to matter more than others, a world where every choice we make is partly contingent on what happened before and contributes to the definition of what will happen next.

Consider greetings, for example. In many societies, greetings take the form of questions about a person's health, e.g. the English "how are you?" In other societies, greetings include questions about the participants' whereabouts, e.g. the pan-Polynesian "where are you going?" discussed by Firth (1972). There are many questions we can ask and hypotheses we can entertain in studying such phenomena. Are these questions formulaic? And, if so, why does the way in which one answers matter? Does the content of such routine exchanges reveal something about the users, their ancestors, humanity at large? Why do people greet at all? How do they know *when* to greet or *who* to greet? Do the similarities and differences in greetings across language varieties, speech communities, and types of encounters within the same community reveal anything interesting *about* the speakers or *to* the speakers?

Although linguistic anthropology is also defined by its ethnographic methods (see chapter 4), such methods are by no means unique; there are other disciplines concerned with the empirical investigation of human behavior that follow similar, although not necessarily identical procedures. Linguistic anthropologists also attach a great deal of importance to writing practices, that is, the ways in which both speech and other symbolic activities are documented and made accessible first for analysis and later for argumentation through a variety of transcription conventions and new technologies (see chapter 5). But, again, there are other disciplines that can claim expertise in such procedures. Although they can help establish a creative tension between theory and practice, methods can never exhaust or define a discipline's uniqueness.

What is unique about linguistic anthropology lies somewhere else, namely, in its interest in speakers as social actors, in language as both a resource for and a product of social interaction, in speech communities as simultaneously real and imaginary entities whose boundaries are constantly being reshaped and negotiated through myriad acts of speaking. Linguistic anthropology is partly built upon the work of structuralist linguists, but provides a different perspective on the object of their study, language, and ultimately shapes a new object. Such a new object includes the "language instinct" discussed by formal grammarians who underscore the biological foundations of the language faculty (Pinker 1994), but it also manifests a different set of concerns and hence a different research agenda.

As discussed in the following chapters, grammarians typically deal with language as an abstract system of rules for the combination of distinct but meaningless elements (phonemes) into meaningful units (morphemes), which, in turn, are combined into higher-level units (words, phrases, sentences). The implied theoretical separation found in structuralist linguistics between language as an abstract system and language as a concrete one restricts the range of phenomena

relevant to the theory.[7] This kind of idealization has meant considerable progress in the understanding of formal properties of languages. Its ultimate goal, however, is not the understanding of the role and place of linguistic forms and contents (grammar included) in people's individual and collective lives, but the universal properties of the human mind entailed by the formal properties of the linguistic systems inferred from the study of intuitions. In such a perspective, speakers only count as representatives of an *abstract* human species. What one particular speaker or one particular dialect can or cannot do compared to others is interesting only in so far as it reveals something about the human brain and our innate capacity to have a language at all. It is the faculty of speaking more than speaking itself that is the object of study of much of contemporary formal linguistics. It is hence a very abstract and removed *homo sapiens* that is being studied by most formal grammarians, not the kids in a Philadelphia neighborhood or the Akan orators of Ghana. For linguistic anthropology, instead, the object and goal of study is, to borrow Toni Morrison's (1994) inspiring metaphor, *language as the measure of our lives*. This is one of the reasons for which linguistic anthropologists tend to focus on linguistic performance and situated discourse. Rather than exclusively concentrating on what makes us cognitively equal, linguistic anthropologists also focus on how language allows for and creates differentiations – between groups, individuals, identities.

Language is the most flexible and most powerful intellectual tool developed by humans. One of its many functions is the ability to reflect upon the world, including itself. Language can be used to talk about language (see chapter 3). More generally, as argued by Michael Silverstein (1976b, 1981, 1993), the possibility of cultural descriptions and hence the fate of cultural anthropology depend on the extent to which a given language allows its speakers to articulate what is being done by words in everyday life. As Boas, Malinowski, and the other founders of modern anthropology knew from the start, it is language that provides the interpretations of the events that the ethnographer observes. In fact, without language there are no reported events. Much before interpretive anthropologists proposed to think of culture as a text, it was mostly texts that ethnographers went home with, that is, notebooks full of descriptions, stories, list of names and objects, a few drawings, and some awkward attempts at translation. What really count are the stories ethnographers heard and the descriptions they collected of people, relationships, places, and events. This aspect of their work makes it even more compelling for all ethnographers to become expert discourse analysts.

But a culture is not just contained in the stories that one hears its members

[7] I am here thinking of the well-known distinction originally made by Saussure (1959) and later reframed by Chomsky first in terms of competence and performance (Chomsky 1965) and then as I-language and E-language (Chomsky 1986).

recount. It is also in the encounters that make the tellings possible, in the types of organization that allow people to participate or be left out, be competent or incompetent, give orders or execute them, ask questions or answer them. As discussed in the next chapters, to be an ethnographer of language means to have the instruments to first hear and then listen carefully to what people are saying when they get together. It means to learn to understand what the participants in the interactions we study are up to, what counts as meaningful *for them,* what they are paying attention to, and for what purposes. Tape recorders and video cameras are a great help, of course, but we also need sophisticated analytical instruments. The discussion of *units of analysis* in this book has been guided by the idea that analysis means to divide the continuous flow of experience that characterizes one's perception of the world into manageable chunks that can be isolated and scrutinized, in some none too *ad hoc*, hopefully reproducible ways. An anthropological approach to the problem of establishing units of analysis implies a concern for whether the segmentation we as analysts propose is consistent with what the participants themselves believe. Unfortunately (or fortunately, depending on the point of view), we cannot just ask people whether it makes sense for us to analyze what they do in terms of the notions developed by language analysts. Such concepts as morphemes, sentences, language games, adjacency pairs, participant frameworks usually make little sense outside of a particular research paradigm. The issue then is how to find analytical concepts that are consistent with the participants' perspective without turning every informant into an anthropologist with our own analytical preferences.

Linguistic anthropologists' quest for the relevant dimensions of human understanding, for the criteria of relevance has entailed an attention to the details of face-to-face encounters that has been seen by some social theorists as implying a separation between the interactions studied and the societal forces operating outside such interactions. Thus, Pierre Bourdieu (1990; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) argues that certain analyses done by conversation analysts and linguistic anthropologists fall into what he calls the "occasionalist fallacy" of believing that each encounter is created on the spot. Instead, Bourdieu argues, the world of any encounter is predefined by broader racial, gender, and class relations (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 144f).

But no linguistic anthropologist would argue against the potential relevance of "broader relations," and in fact much of the discipline's empirical work is dedicated to establishing ways to connect the micro-level phenomena analyzable through recordings and transcripts with the often invisible background of people's relations as mediated by particular histories, including institutional ones. The fact that such connections are hard to make at times – and there is certainly room for improvement in this area – is not always a sign of theoretical weakness or

political naiveté. What might appear as a theoretical gap to sociocultural anthropologists is in fact due to the unwillingness to embrace theories and categories born out of questionable empirical work. Too often the just assumption that "[e]very linguistic exchange contains the *potentiality* of an act of power" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 145) means that analysts can ignore the details of how such acts of power are actually produced. Too often we are presented with phenomena that seem to be out of a script based on the political wisdom of the moment. This wisdom includes the attention to what we do as analysts. If one of the basic ethnographic questions is "Who does this matter for?", we must be prepared to say that in some cases something matters for us, that *we* are the context, as contemporary critical anthropologists have taught us (Clifford and Marcus 1986). But such a recognition – and the reflexivity that it implies – cannot be the totality of our epistemological quest. Other times we must decenter, suspend judgment, and hence learn to "remove ourselves," to be able to hear the speakers' utterances in a way that is hopefully closer to – although by no means identical with – the way in which *they* heard them. Knowledge of the participants' social class, family background, or gender gives us only a portion – albeit a potentially important one – of the story that is being constructed. As pointed out by Susan Gal (1989), the recent work on women's language rightly rejects any essentialist idealization of a "woman's voice" and its implicit notion of a women's separate culture and puts forward the hypothesis of "more ambiguous, often contradictory linguistic practices, differing among women of different classes and ethnic groups and ranging from accommodation to opposition, subversion, rejection or reconstruction of reigning cultural definitions" (Gal 1989: 4). If we want to talk about gender, speech, and power, Gal argues, the first thing we need to do is to find out what counts as power and powerful speech crossculturally. We must be prepared for the possibility that power means different things within different cultures. For the linguistic anthropologist, a differentiated notion of power means that we are likely to find linguistic practices distributed differently across gender, class, and ethnic boundaries. But such distribution cannot be determined once and for all exclusively on the basis of a language-independent assumption of dominance or hegemony.

Linguistic anthropologists start from the assumption that there are dimensions of speaking that can only be captured by studying what people actually *do* with language, by matching words, silences, and gestures with the context in which those signs are produced. A consequence of this programmatic position has been the discovery of many ways in which speaking is a social act and as such is subject to the constraints of social action. It has also allowed us to see how speaking *produces* social action, has consequences for our ways of being in the world, and ultimately for humanity.

1.3 Linguistic anthropology and other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences

In the last twenty years, the field of linguistic anthropology has grown to include or draw from a vast array of other fields including folklore and performance studies (Bauman 1975; 1977; 1986; Bauman and Briggs 1990; 1992; Briggs 1988; Hymes 1981), literacy and education (Cook-Gumperz 1986; Heath 1983; Schieffelin and Gilmore 1986; Scollon and Scollon 1981; Scribner and Cole 1981), cognitive sociology (Cicourel 1973), interactional sociology (Goffman 1961, 1963, 1972, 1974, 1981), social cognition (Hutchins 1995; Lave 1988; Lave and Wenger 1991; Rogoff 1990; Rogoff and Lave 1984), and child language acquisition (Ochs and Schieffelin 1984; 1995; Schieffelin and Ochs 1986). Some linguistic anthropologists have also been influenced by an active group of culturally minded psychologists (Michael Cole and James Wertsch in particular) who brought into American scholarship the work of the Soviet sociohistorical school of psychology headed by Lev Vygotsky and his associates and helped revive the interest of cognitive and social scientists in the theoretical contributions of other Russian scholars, in particular, in the writings of the literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin and his circle (Bakhtin 1968, 1973, 1981a; Clark and Holquist 1984; Cole and Griffin 1986; Vološinov 1973; Wertsch 1985a; 1985b; 1991). As we shall see in later chapters, some of the concepts introduced by these scholars such as activity, reported speech, voice, and heteroglossia, have an important role in contemporary models of language use.

Ethnomethodology, as the study of the methods used by social actors in interpreting their everyday life (Garfinkel 1972), also offered several important and innovative ideas for those researchers interested in applying traditional ethnographic methods to the study of everyday speaking. From this phenomenologically inspired approach, linguistic anthropologists can learn or see confirmed several recurrent intuitions about the constitution of culture and society in communicative encounters. First, they can easily relate to the ethnomethodological principle that social structure is not an independent variable, which exists outside of social practices, whether in the form of social categories like "status" and "role" (Cicourel 1972) or in assumptions about what constitutes someone's gender (Garfinkel 1967). Social structure is an emergent product of interactions, in which social actors produce culture by applying native (typically implicit) methods of understanding and communicating what they are and what they care about. In other words, members of society work at making their actions (words included) accountable, i.e. rational and meaningful for all practical purposes.

Second, if knowledge is implicit, it follows that we cannot just go and ask people what they think (that often just gives us more data to analyze – and if we kept