1

Introduction

Directions in the anthropology of language

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> The bringing-forth of language is an inner need of human beings, not merely an external necessity for maintaining communal intercourse, but a thing lying in their own nature, indispensable for the development of their mental powers and the attainment of a worldview, to which man can attain only by bringing his thinking to clarity and precision through communal thinking with others.
>
> (Wilhelm von Humboldt 1988: 27)

1.1 The anthropology of language

It is a truism that humans would be different creatures entirely were it not for the possession of language. One of anthropology's tasks is to find out what this means. A contention of this handbook is that anthropology must be able to specify what it is about language that helps us answer the two overarching research questions of the discipline:

(1) What distinguishes humankind from other species?
(2) Within our species, what is the nature and extent of diversity?

One way in which human groups are alike is that none are without language. This universally distinguishes humans from other species. Yet the same human groups are radically *un*alike insofar as languages show considerable diversity at all levels of their structure (Boas 1911, Comrie 1989, Ladefoged and Maddieson 1996, Van Valin and La Polla 1997, Croft 2001, 2003, Evans and Levinson 2009, Dixon 2010, and many references in those works). To truly understand – and demonstrate – the significance of this, the anthropology of language needs to confront some major conceptual and empirical challenges, including: (1) to define *language* (and describe

languages); (2) to show how language is related to the special properties of the human *mind*; (3) to show how language is related to the processes and structures of *society* and social life; and (4) to show how language is related to the knowledge, values, technologies, and practices that make up *culture*. Taken together, the contributions to this handbook address these challenges, drawing from a wide range of disciplines, literatures, theories, and methodologies.

In this introductory chapter, we want to point to some issues that we see as central to the anthropology of language, motivating the choices we have made as editors, and offering something of a preview of the book as a whole. We do not attempt a comprehensive survey of the handbook's themes. Nor do we offer an essay outlining our editorial account of the issues. One reason is that our own versions of the story are already in print (see Enfield 2002c, 2009, 2013; Kockelman 2005, 2010, 2013; Sidnell 2005, 2010; Sidnell and Enfield 2012, and indeed our chapters in this book). But more importantly with respect to this volume, our goal as editors is to allow the contributing authors' many voices to come forward and explicate the core concerns of research on language within the scope of anthropology.

1.1.1   Two senses of "linguistic anthropology"

The term *linguistic anthropology* is as contested, negotiated, reflexive, and indexical as any other. While extensive discussion of this term falls outside the scope of this introductory chapter, we would nevertheless like to register the issue of disciplinary terminology in this handbook's title, and address expectations that the reader might have.

The term that describes our given topic – *linguistic anthropology* – can be understood in at least two ways. A first reading of the term is rather specific, and is subsumed within the broader scope of this book. It predominantly refers to a subfield within the modern discipline of anthropology in its American context. There is a journal associated with the subfield (the *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*), a section of the American Anthropological Association devoted to it (the Society for Linguistic Anthropology), and a set of scholars who self-consciously work under its banner – though, to be sure, members of this group come from different research traditions, and often hold quite different (even contentious) commitments. Perhaps most importantly as background to this handbook, the work of these scholars has been anthologized, summarized, and historicized numerous times (see Lucy 1993, Blount 1995, Brenneis and Macaulay 1996, Silverstein and Urban 1996, Hanks 1996, Duranti 1997, 2001, 2004, Agha 2007, Ahearn 2011, Blum 2012; cf. also Foley 1997).

Duranti (2003) outlines three paradigms that have fed into this relatively focused and well-institutionalized tradition in the anthropology of

language: (1) Boasian *linguistic description* and documentation, and associated work on the comparative psychology of language, including *linguistic relativity* (e.g., Boas 1911, Sapir 1949, Whorf 1956, with antecedents in scholars like Herder, von Humboldt, and Wundt); (2) Gumperz and Hymes' related traditions of the *ethnography of speaking* and *interactional sociolinguistics*, respectively (e.g., Hymes 1964, Bauman and Sherzer 1974, Gumperz 1982, Gumperz and Hymes 1986), and (3) *practice* approaches to language in social life, and related social constructivist approaches (e.g., Silverstein 1976, Bourdieu 1977, 1990, Hanks 1990, 1996, 2005).

Framed another way, linguistic anthropology in this narrow sense brings together Jakobson-inspired understandings of the importance of reflexivity; practice theory-inspired notions of the dialectical relations between linguistic practice (parole, interaction, discourse), language structure (grammar, code, langue), and language ideology (culture, worldview, beliefs and values); and a principled, and often relatively conservative, vision of the social sciences. Silverstein's Chapter 6 in this volume outlines an accordingly broad vision of the subdiscipline's key concepts, and the kinds of claims they allow one to make. And many of the chapters in this volume are authored by self-identifying linguistic anthropologists. Kockelman's Chapter 24 takes up and characterizes some of the core commitments of this subdiscipline, with an analysis, and critique, of their logic and origins. Kockelman's Table 24.1 lists some of the subdiscipline's core moves, including "Discourse as much as grammar, diachrony as much as synchrony, motivation as much as arbitrariness"; "Language as action as much as language as reflection"; "Meta-language as much as language, and reflexive language as much as reflective language"; and "Anthropology and linguistics before the 60s as much as anthropology and linguistics since the 60s."

The subdiscipline of linguistic anthropology in the narrow sense is an indispensable source of questions, methods, and solutions in the anthropology of language, though its coverage of the intended scope of this handbook is only partial. Much relevant research is clearly both linguistic and anthropological yet is not normally considered part of linguistic anthropology in the sense just described. Hence we have conceived the scope of this handbook in terms of a second, broader reading of the phrase in our title. This second sense of the term – perhaps best labeled *the anthropology of language* – encompasses any work that attempts to answer the research questions of anthropology (see 1–2, above) by focusing on the structure, use, development and/or evolution of language. This of course subsumes all of the work discussed in this chapter so far.

In (3) below we list a range of interrelated questions that are posed – and, at least provisionally, answered – in the full set of chapters that follow. Many chapters also detail the history of such questions, and the successes and shortcomings of the answers they have received in the past.

(3) Some central research questions within the anthropology of language, and chapters in this handbook that address them (see the chapters for many further references on these topics):

- What is the human-specific social cognition that is a prerequisite for language? What possible cultural variation is there? Are there primate-specific forms of social cognition that relate to it? (Rumsey, Dingemanse and Floyd, Brown and Gaskins)
- What are the human-specific biological capacities for vocal imitation? What are the genetic underpinnings for, and the ontogenetic development of, the vocal capacity? (Dediu)
- What is the relationship between language and thought – either speaking a particular language (say, English versus Japanese), or speaking human language per se? And how does one even pose such a question productively? (Goldin-Meadow, Brandom, Brown and Gaskins, Sidnell, Silverstein)
- What might diversity in human genetics tell us about the history and diversification of languages and cultures? Does this converge with evidence from the archaeological record? How to classify languages historically? What can this classification tell us about the history of human cultural diversification? (Blench, Dediu, Levinson)
- How does linguistic structure (e.g., grammar) relate to language use (e.g., what ends people use language as a means for) and linguistic ideology (e.g., speakers' understandings of their own usage patterns and language structure)? (Couper-Kuhlen and Thompson, Brandom, Sidnell and Enfield, Fleming and Lempert)
- Are there universal principles of grammatical organization in languages? What are the constraints on these? If there are few universal grammatical patterns, are there quasi-universal patterns of grammaticalization? (Bickel, Dixon, Couper-Kuhlen and Thompson)
- Are there universal principles in the underlying semantic organization of languages, thus accounting for variation in systematic ways? What is the relevance of grammatical hierarchies that reflect cognitive preferences such as an interest in self and addressee over other, agent over patient, animate over inanimate? or semantic fields such as color, biological categories, spatial relations? What types of meanings get encoded in grammatical and lexical categories (e.g., in "rules" and "words")? And what are the conditions and consequences of language-specific and cross-linguistic patterns of such encodings? (Dixon, Bickel, Sandler *et al.*, Goldin-Meadow)
- What is the art and craft of descriptive and documentary linguistics? What are the best practices, core methods, and key resources for collecting, transcribing, analyzing, storing and communicating linguistic findings? (Dixon, Rice)

- What are the structures of social interaction in conversation? What is the infrastructure for language in interaction? (Sidnell, Dingemanse and Floyd, Enfield and Sidnell)
- What do we mean by "meaning," and how is meaning essential to being human (if not specific to human beings)? (Silverstein, Rumsey)
- How does human language compare to other modes of communication – such as animal languages, computer languages, or pidgin languages? What makes human language both unique and comparable as a semiotic system? (Levinson, Silverstein, Kockelman [Chapter 29])
- How did language evolve? How do languages evolve? (Levinson, Dediu, Goldin-Meadow, Enfield, Sandler *et al.*)
- What are the sociocultural conditions for, and consequences of, language vitality, or for its tragic counterpart, language death? (Rice, Sandler *et al.*, Eckert)
- How does inter-language diversity (e.g., the historical and geographic distribution of languages), and intra-language difference (e.g., ways of speaking particular to subgroups of people), relate to political, ethnic, economic, gender, and cultural differences? (Muehlmann, Bate, Eckert)
- What is the relation between ritual language and poetic language, or between highly condensed and formally constrained language and so–called everyday or spontaneous language practices? (Tavárez, Fleming and Lempert)
- How do processes occurring on ontogenetic, interactional, historical, and phylogenetic timescales interact to give rise to the emergent phenomena we tend to reify as "language," "culture," "reality," and "mind"? (Brown and Gaskins, Enfield, Faudree and Hansen)
- What is the effect of different media on language (interaction, society, culture)? And how do different linguistic and sociocultural practices mediate our uptake and use of different media? (Gershon and Manning, Kockelman [Chapter 29])
- What is the relation, however tense or unnoticed, between different disciplines (themselves cultural formations par excellence) that have historically taken "language" in some guise as an object of study? And how have such differences, and such submerged resonances, affected the study of language and culture? (Kockelman [Chapter 24], Stasch, Blench, Eckert)

A comprehensive survey of the anthropology of language would fully address and explicate all of these questions and the lines of work that handle them (among many more questions and lines of work). We cannot do more than touch on each of these issues in this handbook, but in doing at least this we hope that the volume contributes to a broader characterization of our topic. So, it should be clear, this book is not about Eskimo words for snow, nor is it about the exotic patterns of speaking exhibited by far-flung peoples. It is intended as a timely exploration of what meaning is,

how it is manifest, and why it matters – when seen through the lens of language, culture, and cognition. Now, to see how the seemingly disparate lines of inquiry in (3) may be connected, let us consider some challenges that crosscut them.

1.2   Four challenges for an anthropology of language

In the above sections, we have raised some challenges that linguistic anthropology must meet. We now try to articulate the questions that define these challenges. To some extent, the challenges are addressed in the chapters of this volume. But to some extent, these challenges remain open: They should continue to be encountered and explored for years to come.

1.2.1   What is language?

Linguistic anthropology cannot be seriously undertaken without a clear idea of the ontology of language and a full command of the formal and technical aspects of scientific approaches to language. We are dealing with a phenomenon that is unique in the animal world. Language is exceedingly complex, and the details of this complexity matter deeply for understanding how language defines us. When we refer to "language," we cannot mean animal communication more generally – though of course language is one form of animal communication – nor can we mean to include metaphors, as in "body language," "the language of dance," or "the language of the bees." The properties of human language show beyond doubt that it is unique.

For example, to cite classic structuralist criteria, there is the *double articulation* or *duality of patterning* that links a generative phonological system to a generative semantico-syntactic system (Hockett 1960, Martinet 1980); there is the *generative capacity* that arises from paradigmatic relations in combination with syntagmatic relations, and the *hierarchical/recursive properties* of constituency (Bloomfield 1933, Harris 1951); there is the *displacement* by which speech events can be decoupled from narrated events and other non-immediate, including imagined, states of affairs (Jakobson 1990b); and of course, there is the *referential capacity* by which we can thematize entities and assert things about them in ways that are relatively truth-conditioned; and so on (cf. Hockett 1960, Vygotsky 1962, 1978, Halliday and Hasan 1976, Goffman 1981, Chafe 1994).

A different kind of definitive criterion for language has been found in comparative research on the non-language-possessing creatures most close to us – that is, human infants and non-human primates – to see what they lack that language users have. This criterion is a form of uniquely human social cognition known as *shared intentionality* (Tomasello 2006, 2008, Tomasello *et al.* 2005; cf. Astington 2006), a psychological capacity that allows us to achieve the primitive prerequisite for making reference in

language, namely the joint attentional behavior that underlies the use of the pointing gesture. This is not merely a matter of looking where someone is pointing, but rather of the very ability to point such that another will look. This, Tomasello argues, is the definitive property of human cognition for language, and the thing from which all else in language follows (see Tomasello 2008; cf. this volume, Chapters 15 and 16, Moore and Dunham 1995, Sperber and Wilson 1995, Kita 2003, Enfield and Levinson 2006).

A last line of work on the definitive properties of language we want to note here comes from the rationalist tradition of generative linguistics, which in its most radical recent form defines language with exclusive reference to the basic property that Humboldt (1988) famously observed – language allows infinite expression from finite means – filtered by the idea that the only thing of interest is the operation of this system in the mind. The "externalization" of language – both in the sense of the motoric/ perceptual/inferential processes involved in language production and comprehension, and in the more general sense of communication and the pursuit of goals in social interaction – is seen as an irrelevant distraction (see Chomsky 2011, Berwick *et al.* 2013). The latter stance, in particular, has alienated this approach from most research that would characterize itself as connected in any way to anthropology. But aside from the most radical versions of generative work, there is nevertheless plenty of useful work being done on linguistic structure within such frameworks broadly understood (Foley and Van Valin 1984, Van Valin and La Polla 1997, Talmy 2000, Bresnan 2001, Jackendoff 2002).

Whatever one's convictions are with respect to the uniquely distinguishing properties of language, where these properties come from, and what follows from them, when we pay serious attention to language as a domain of study, this demands that we draw on pretty much all of the fundamental questions and findings of the discipline of linguistics: from phonetics and phonology, to morphology and syntax, to semantics and pragmatics, including the psychology and typology of all these. Together, these properties of language give rise to extraordinarily complex, even baroque, systems that present formidable descriptive, analytic, and conceptual challenges. Attempts to assess their significance for human affairs without understanding their details are unlikely to succeed. As Dixon forcefully states in Chapter 2 of this handbook, a command of the technicalities of language and its description is indispensable to any work that purports to use the study of language as a means to its ends.

1.2.2 How is language related to the special properties of the human mind?

One of the central themes of research on what makes us human is the question of mind. There is no general consensus on what our minds are like, but most would agree that they would not be this way if it were not for

language. (And, conversely, language would not be this way, and indeed would not exist, were it not for our kind of mind – see below.) Let us now note some of the many connections between the two.[1]

According to a set of what might be termed *rationalist* perspectives on language and mind, conceptual categories of thought are in some sense inborn, given to us as members of the human species, and thus universal, and relatively independent of influence from individual languages (proposals differ widely in kind, from Descartes to Chomsky, Pinker, Jackendoff, Lakoff, Talmy, and Wierzbicka, among many others). This can mean a lot of things, from the possession of abstract mental devices such as the "merge" operation proposed by Chomsky to underlie the syntax of all constructions in all languages (Chomsky 1995, Hauser *et al.* 2002, Berwick *et al.* 2013), to the pan-mammalian prelinguistic cognition that underlies the basic subject–predicate or topic–comment structure of propositions (Hurford 2003, 2007, 2012), to inborn concepts ranging from the rich and non-decomposable meanings proposed by Fodor (1975, 1998) to proposed semantically general and universal primitive concepts out of which language-specific meanings are argued to be composed (Jackendoff 1983, 2002, Wierzbicka 1996). Finally, there are proposals for universal principles of cognition that underlie the interpretation of utterances in communicative contexts, via generic principles of inference that use simple heuristics grounded in natural meaning (Grice 1989, Levinson 1983, 2000, Sperber and Wilson 1995).

These so-called rationalist positions are often contrasted with versions of a *relativist* position (though they are not always incompatible with linguistic relativity; see for example Wierzbicka 1992; see also Chapter 29 in this handbook by Kockelman on artificial languages, examining the origins of, and to some extent the problems with, this rationalist/relativist distinction). Lines of work on *linguistic relativity* have explored the idea that some conceptual categories or patterns of thought are given by or shaped by specific languages, and thus can vary across human groups. We speak of linguistic relativity when a person's knowledge or usage of a specific language influences the person's (cultural) cognition. The idea is that the language a person speaks can contribute in non-trivial ways to how that person thinks and/or behaves. On one interpretation of this, our patterns of thought and behavior are shaped by the fact that we possess language in the most general sense – i.e., that we are language-possessing creatures (Wierzbicka 1989, Lucy 1992; Tomasello and Call 1997). But most work is concerned with effects of knowing or using *a* language, as opposed to other languages – e.g., cognitive effects of being a Hopi speaker as opposed to being an English speaker (Sapir 1949; Brown and Lenneberg 1954, Whorf 1956; Lucy 1992, cf. Gumperz and Levinson 1996, Boroditsky 2000, 2001, Gentner and Goldin-Meadow 2003, Majid *et al.* 2004).

One domain of relativity effects, known as *thinking for speaking*, involves a direct online influence of language on thought and action (Boas 1911;

Slobin 1996), in the sense that the language one speaks can have a definable effect on the way in which one thinks or acts, where this thinking or acting has to do with the planning and production of language itself. For example, speakers of a certain language might be required to distinguish between grammatical marking for singular versus plural, and, accordingly, these speakers are more likely to notice whether entities in a scene are singular or plural. Another domain of relativity in psychological processing is suggested by research in cognitive psychology on *overshadowing* effects from language (Schooler and Engstler-Schooler 1990). This is where linguistic labeling can influence cognitive processes like memory and perceptual judgments. If you witness a collision between two vehicles, your memory of the scene can be biased depending on the words chosen to describe it – e.g., English *bumping into* versus *crashing into* (Loftus and Palmer 1974). The point of interest here is that the distinction between *bump* and *crash* happens to be made in the English language but not in other languages. This leads to the prediction that if languages have markedly distinct semantic systems – which we know to be the case – then such influences should give rise to linguistic relativity effects.

These effects of linguistic categorization are the subject of a significant line of work in comparative psychology and cognitive anthropology that is grounded in the developmental psychological research on the acquisition of linguistic and conceptual categories carried out by Roger Brown (1958a, 1958b). Brown's impact was far-reaching, with seminal research on linguistic categorization in semantic domains including color, basic-level categorization, and pronouns (see Pinker 1998). The implications of Brown's work on linguistic characterization were more famously developed by his student Eleanor Rosch (1978), among many others since, who applied the ideas to indigenous knowledge and categorization of the natural world. This opened up a range of debates about whether tendencies of such categorization are grounded in universal properties of perception and cognition, versus locally specific principles of utility and preference (cf. Berlin 1992 versus Hunn 1982, cf. Enfield in press). Brown's original observations about referential formulation were explicitly instrumentalist. His idea was that semantic categories emerge from communicatively practical needs, ultimately being the way they are because they have been selected by their efficacy in achieving ends in social coordination (Brown 1958a, Vygotsky 1962, cf. Clark 1996), thus hinting more at the possibility of relativity in the conceptual/semantic structure of languages.

A final example of a type of linguistic relativity effect is related to the use of language in the flow of social interaction. Languages provide different lexico-syntactic resources for formulating speech acts (Sidnell and Enfield 2012 and Chapter 17 of this volume). These different resources can have different *collateral effects* on the kinds of speech acts that can be produced, whereby speech acts in different languages will differ in terms of the kinds of normatively constrained responses that can or should be produced

within the context of conversation. Note that this does not merely mean that different communities conventionalize different speech acts. The kind of relativity proposed here is not merely about the main business of a given speech act, but also about the interactional side-effects of the language-specific resources through which the social business is carried out (see Sidnell and Enfield 2012).

Linguistic relativity raises the question of causality. What leads to what? A range of work on language and mind has noticed correlations between relations in language systems, and has argued or implied that these correlations in publicly shared and thus collective systems are caused by psychological biases in individual agents. Table 1.1 lists a few sample claims of such correlations, where each correlation implies a causal relation between psychological or behavioral processes and synchronic structures.

Correlations among features and elements of language systems such as those shown here are sometimes assumed to be the result of cognitive biases (Hawkins 2004, 2011). The Greenbergian correlations are often said to arise from the preference for a kind of "harmony" that comes from having head-modifier structures aligned the same way in a language system. In his account of grammatical change by *drift*, Sapir (1921) argued that grammatical paradigms tend towards balance, thus avoiding the "psychological shakiness" that out-of-balance paradigms may cause. Similarly,

Table 1.1 Some observed correlations between relations in language systems, where causality is proposed or implied

Relation A	Correlates with Relation B	Example references
Some words are shorter than others	Those words are more frequently used than others	Zipf 1935, 1949
Some words change slower than others	Those words are more frequently used than others	Pagel *et al*. 2007
Some words are shorter than others	Those words are less informative than others	Piantadosi *et al*. 2011
Verbs come after their objects	Adpositions come after their nouns	Greenberg 1966
Speakers of Lg A attend to and notice plurality of entities, speakers of B don't	Plurality is obligatorily marked in the grammar of A, not in B	Slobin 1996
Speakers of Lg A make certain categorization decisions, speakers of B don't	Certain semantic categories are structured differently in Lg A than in B	Whorf 1956, Lucy 1992
Meanings that are grounded in a cultural value V of speakers of Lg A are encoded in linguistic structure/practice X in A	Meanings that are grounded in V of speakers of Lg A are also encoded in linguistic structures/practices Y, Z, etc. in A	Hale 1986, Wierzbicka 1992
Speech act X is formulated using interrogative syntax in Lg A, not in B	Normative response to speech act X is formulated as an "answer to a question" in Lg A, not in B	Sidnell and Enfield 2012