1 Toward a Theory of Language Materiality: An Introduction

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> "The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life."
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> (Marx and Engels, "Thesis on Feuerbach," from *The German Ideology*)

What is "the language of real life"? Reading this quote through Raymond Williams's (1977: 38) suggestion that language is "a distinctive material process," we see the language of everyday life as material practice: embedded within structures of history and power, including class relations and markets, but also having physical presence. The language of everyday life is what people do with and through language as they work and play, making meaning and creating value in the process. In this volume, we seek to draw out the importance of considering these practices to be "distinctive material processes." Putting language and materiality together at the center of analysis in this way can illuminate both how a linguistic approach to materiality can shed light on processes of meaning-making and value production and how incorporating materiality into linguistic analysis can ground such processes within social, cultural, political, and economic structures of power (Cavanaugh and Shankar 2014; Shankar and Cavanaugh 2012).

To theorize language materially is an ontological move – to view it as a material presence with physical and metaphysical properties and as embedded within political economic structures. Rather than view language *and* materiality in tandem by conceptualizing materiality alongside but distinct from language, we focus instead on the materiality *of* language, or what we call *language materiality*. In developing this concept, we have interrogated definitions and uses of materiality in ways that attend to how materiality relates to language and have also reconsidered the nature of language itself. We programmatically offer language materiality as an analytic for studying ethnographic contexts in which an explicit focus on materiality furthers understandings of language in use, and vice versa.

Our goal in this volume is to develop a theory and methodology for examining language materially. This undertaking is ethnographically driven, premised

on a rethinking of the forms and presences that language takes in contemporary capitalism and the concomitant ethnographic contingencies needing further attention.

The Analytic of Language Materiality

Throughout this volume we ask: what happens when we regard language not as "immaterial" and existing in a referential or indexical sense to frame that which takes physical, tangible form, but rather as consisting of its own materiality? How might language exhibit material qualities, either alone or in conjunction with other registers of materiality? To regard linguistic practices and the ideologies that shape them as immaterial is to miss not only how language interacts with physical objects, environments, and forces but also to elide the material nature of linguistic practice itself – its sounds, shape, and material presences. What we find so compelling about regarding language materially is precisely how doing so can bring into focus the political economic as well as the sensual characteristics of language, its use, and forms. Williams's (1977) insight that language is a "practical material activity" introduced earlier entails considering both the totality (as located within and part of political economic conditions) and simultaneity (as located within moments of meaning-making) of language use. Indeed, materialist analyses of language have brought to the fore the ways in which language is embedded within political economic structures and relations, whereas studies of language focusing on sound or orthography, for instance, have looked at the physical presence of language as an essential part of how it is experienced and made sense of (we discuss both of these tacks later). As Williams has argued, language both requires physical forms and plays a role in political economic relations – and, if viewed as constitutive material practice, can productively shed light on its materiality and advance Marxist analyses of human experience.

Scholarship in the social sciences and humanities evidences a strong interest in materiality as a vital dimension of social life and signification, connecting issues as diverse as biopolitics, governmentality, consumption, and performance. Language, however, often receives short shrift in this scholarship. Some in literary criticism, philosophy, and other fields, for instance, critique the so-called linguistic turn for overshadowing materiality altogether (Coole and Frost 2010), while others view language-oriented research methods and data as too technical and inaccessible to nonspecialists and so limit their discussions of language to its referential or descriptive uses. Materiality is provocative precisely because of the many ways it has been and continues to be conceptualized. Some delineate materiality into two major schools of thought: (1) Marxist and other structurally oriented inquiries that focus on historical or dialectical materialism; and (2) phenomenological writings, such as explorations of

perception, embodiment, or the senses (see Kruks 2010). Language materiality offers a different ontology, in which the sensorium and Marxist political economy are intertwined. In doing so, it offers the potential for emergent frameworks and methodologies through which to understand political economy, technological infrastructures, and the production and circulation of value and meaning in contemporary capitalism. Overall, language-oriented scholarship has much to contribute to conversations about materiality through attention to areas such as affect, poetics, sound, and sentiment, as well as their underpinning ideologies, pragmatics, and metapragmatics.

We build on a legacy that has not altogether overlooked the nature of the relationship between language and materiality. Of course, Marx and Engels, as well as many of the social theorists and other scholars who extended their ideas, were less interested in delving into the details of linguistic activity as material practice. Although much ethnographic work implicitly uses language as evidence of people's ideas, beliefs, and values, and theoretical schools of thought in sociocultural anthropology have used linguistic structures as models, language use has rarely been a focus within cultural anthropological treatments of materiality. Similarly, materiality has not been a central theoretical occupation of much scholarly work on language. At the same time, we see suggestions over the last century of such a twin perspective. For instance, much of Edward Sapir's and Benjamin Lee Whorf's theories of language were premised on language's relationships to objects, mental states, and modes of interpreting the physical world. In the 1950s and 1960s, attention to the physical world was also evident in studies of how language was understood to order reality through taxonomies of animals, spectrums of color, or kinship structures. Since the 1960s, linguistic anthropologists have attended to contexts of communication as shaping and being shaped by interaction, including the ethnography of speaking and ethnomethodology. Sociolinguists have sought to bring contextual variables, including class, race, gender, and place, to bear on an analysis of discourse, and studies foregrounding relationships between language and political economy directly take up materialist approaches, wherein language ideologies and use shape access to social power and wealth accumulation. Although linguistic anthropological work has drawn on the writings of C. S. Peirce (e.g., 1955) for decades, only recently have scholars of language begun to examine the materiality of Peircean "firstness" and qualia (qualities) as essential to the communication process.

Indeed, a focus on the material forms of language can be seen as an entrée into the material conditions under which it is produced, encountered, and circulates. One of linguistic anthropology's vital contributions to conversations about materiality is its focused and ethnographically grounded attention to the medium of communication and to the nature of its mediality. By medium, we mean anything that takes on or is given the ability to connect actors to one

another and/or to aspects of the contexts in which they move. Specifically, here we aim to draw attention to language as a medium that travels through select channels – via the voice, the page, the screen, the MP3 – and to emphasize that such forms matter to what it is and does. Focusing on the medium has been offered both as a counterpoint to mentalist approaches to language (Wittgenstein 1991; Schneider 2006) and as a way of understanding linguistic signification as a material process inseparable from other social activity (Coward and Ellis 1977; Voloshinov 1973). Mediality, a concept receiving increased attention in fields such as philosophy, art history, and media studies, often via its roots in Wittgenstein, is the quality, nature, and characteristics of the connections enabled by any particular medium – its mediation via a set of characterizing qualities and conditions. Language, per force, requires a medium, although the mediality of how this is instantiated within spatiotemporal moments will of course differ. So attention to the mediality of linguistic practice might involve looking at any number of moments or points of connection across and between events, contexts, people, and things while focusing on material aspects of this practice. Our use of the term "linguistic materiality" in exploring the construction of authenticity in contemporary capitalism (Cavanaugh and Shankar 2014) was meant to capture just this notion: that the material aspect of language as a medium may matter to what it is, does, and means. Language materiality broadens this perspective, including a focus on the medium, mediality, and other ways in which the linguistic and the material interact.

Our development of this language materiality framework has been motivated at least in part by the recognition that language itself is changing in terms of the technologies that mediate our speaking, the globalizing processes that commodify it in previously unforeseen ways, and how we, as ethnographers, must attend to language use across the multiple, often simultaneous, modalities across which everyday communication now occurs. Linguistic anthropology is at a moment in which delimiting the communicative encounter to face-to-face interaction is not sufficient, if it ever was. Even when linguistic anthropologists have acknowledged the broader impact of globalization and other processes, ethnography has, until recently, remained focused on relatively small-scale, contained communities. Our own earlier projects, which focused on populations rooted in distinct locations – Silicon Valley and northern Italy – are cases in point. Even when our conceptualizations of these communities were complicated by diasporic media consumption and global circulations of heritage language revitalization discourses, respectively, they primarily examined language without attention to materiality (but see Shankar 2006, 2008; Cavanaugh 2005). As we undertook projects of broader scale across locations, we faced a conundrum: linguistic anthropology in large part still privileges the face-to-face communicative encounter; moreover, the emphasis on language ideologies has tended to privilege the nation-state and citizenship, potentially complicating

moves to look beyond it and engage the global. We are by no means suggesting that linguistic anthropologists and those involved in similar research shift focus away from face-to-face interaction, but rather that we should think deliberately about medium and form as shaping communication and potentially remaking the everyday encounter. In this sense, we find it productive to investigate explicitly what language has become, as well as how we study it anthropologically.

The time is ripe for such an investigation because of the transformations wrought by global capitalism that shape the flows of people, information, and goods; by technological innovations, such as the growing ubiquity of cellphones and social media; and by political transformations; for example, recent revolutions in the Middle East or the grassroots activism emerging from events in Ferguson, Missouri, which involved crowd-sourced information and new types of mediated participation (Bonilla and Rosa 2015). All draw our attention to language materiality. We view this analytic as capacious enough to attend to language as expressed through a variety of material technologies such as texts, tweets, and snaps, as well as a variety of forms: fonts, ALL CAPS, and common abbreviations for digital text ("u" for you, "2" for to, and so on). What binds together these language materialities across different domains and invites their analysis with the conceptual toolkit we offer are the exigencies of how people now engage with language. With machines that autocorrect these very words as we type them on our screens, our utterances enter the world only partially of our own doing, mediating the ways our voices are now "heard" as much through technological means as they are through direct interaction. Mediated communicative practices may be experienced simultaneously the world over, but experiences of these practices also differ dramatically according to economically shaped possibilities of participation. With intelligence extending from devices that editorialize and geographically locate our utterances, as well as correct and limit us when we do not conform to preferred parameters, these anthropogenic technologies "strike back," as Latour (2005) might say, in ways that make language materiality inseparable from the contextualized meaning of utterances and how they may circulate.

What has become evident in our process of developing this volume is that as much as the theorizing of language and materiality has been conceptually unwieldy in the abstract, it has been methodologically challenging as well. Minding materiality is not a common lesson in linguistic anthropology; recording, transcribing, and conversational analysis are at best on the fringes of cultural anthropology and archaeology. Yet as linguistic anthropologists, we have to be aware of the materiality of our data (recordings, transcripts, fieldnotes), even as they add layers of observed context and significance to having been witness to the speech events in question, either as observer, participant, or both. The actions of revisiting and reviewing recordings, excerpting and arranging transcripts, and adding observable

metalinguistic data underscore the dynamic nature of recordings and what is possible with them. These activities may also, as they have done with us, serve to underline their very materiality. Although we do not mean to fetishize these forms of data, the importance of recorded data, sound, and notes – the very tools of linguistic anthropology – has trained our attention on materiality as practitioners of our subfield as much as it occurs as a vital aspect of our subject matter.

For these reasons, we find this an ideal moment to advance new analytics and methodologies to study language materially. In the rest of this introduction, we flesh out our theory of language materiality and present a preview of the volume. We sought to include a range of voices, perspectives, and academic conversations in this book. Some take up materiality by attending to the form of language and its meanings: looking at language in terms of its sounds, the channels in which it occurs, or its objectifications. Others investigate the physical forms that surround language and with which it co-occurs, or take a materialist view that views linguistic practice and form via political economy. Several contributions take into account the medium of communication by pondering its materiality and the impact it has on how people encounter and use it. All engage with ongoing conversations in linguistic anthropology and allied fields, while seeking to advance broader scholarly understandings of what counts as material and why this might matter.

Materiality and Culture

Meanings of materiality are central to conceptualizing how humans encounter, experience, and interact with their surroundings. To discern those meanings involves studying perception and the relationship of bodies to time and space, as well as efforts to understand and/or conceptualize the relationship of human minds to their environments – via their bodies, their histories, their natural and built environments. Such inquiries are grounded in broader discussions about the relationship between subject and object, agency, and the nature of knowledge. These are not only philosophical questions but also anthropological ones, and anthropologists have often turned to philosophical insights in phenomenology to help them explore these issues.

Phenomenology, which explores the nature of being from a variety of perspectives, examines materiality as it is experienced. Merleau-Ponty, for instance, sought to bring together knowledge and experience, to conceptualize the body's experience of the world as active perception rather than as passive absorption. In doing so, he saw no Cartesian divide between the self and the world. Rather, humans inhabit and relate to the world through the body: "the unity of either the subject or the object is not a real unity, but a presumptive unity on the horizon of experience" (Merleau-Ponty 2013: 228).

Perception, in this view, is offered as the center of subjectivity, achieved through the interaction of a perceiving subject and the material world around them. The material, then, becomes relevant in how subjects experience it – through sitting at desks or walking in gardens, for example, as well as presumably through hearing voices or viewing documents – though such linguistic particulars generally fall outside the philosophical lens. For Merleau-Ponty and works that build on his philosophical insights, it makes sense to talk about the perception of, say, the color yellow, as causing certain affective responses, such as feelings of warmth, unmediated by the cultural semiotic systems within which color perception is embedded and through which such meanings are formed. As Silverstein and Keane (see Chapter 2) discuss, these views give scant attention to cultural diversity and variations in experience, but then assert, for instance, that "some series of inter-involvements is always encoded in the preliminary character of experience, flowing into the tone and color of perception" (Connolly 2010: 183).

Other philosophers have taken up the issue of context – a vital issue in linguistic anthropology – in ways that interrogate what it is, how we relate to it, and how we can understand it. Heidegger's endeavor to theorize humans' place in space, or their relationship to particular locations, through the concept of "dwelling" has been helpful to this and similar efforts to conceptualize how humans live in the world. Dwelling, "the manner in which mortals are on the earth" (Heidegger 1971: 148), like perception for Merleau-Ponty, is active rather than passive. Human beings inhabit the world through building and creating dwelling places, sites where their actions produce a meaningful connection to locations. This process occurs at least in part through thinking about places, as Heidegger describes with his example of the old bridge at Heidelberg – if we imagine it, we are already there, dwelling there, perhaps even more so than those who pass it by every day, unthinking. Accordingly, the material can be experienced through memory and imagination as much as by interacting directly with it through talk, as Heidegger asserts, "The relationship between man and space is none other than dwelling, strictly thought *and spoken*" (1971: 157, our emphasis).

Heidegger regards speaking, then, as a process integral to his conception of how we interact with the material world. To speak of places and people's relationship to them is part of dwelling, part of how the material is shared and made social (see Basso 1996). This largely referential conceptualization of language offers one way in which it may participate in linking experiencing subjects and the material world they inhabit: language – internally or externally experienced – may describe it and, in describing it, bring aspects of it experientially near (see Carnap 1937).[1] Anthropologists have sought to bring a sense of sociality to bear on phenomenological debates, analyzing how culture may shape perception, as well as the conceptualization of subjects and objects (Jackson 1996;

Stoller 1997). In these studies, language is often seen as a mechanism for describing the world, similar to the strictly referential role of language as depicted by Heidegger. However, the relationship of language to the material can be far more capacious when the analytical lens is broadened to include its nonreferential functions, as much contemporary linguistic anthropology has shown; we seek to further complicate and broaden this relationship through a focus on language materiality.

Debates about the role and meaning of materiality – generally as contrasted with some conception of immateriality, such as spirit or mind – have been central to important anthropological discussions, many of which continue to shape how we do anthropology, from the nature of ethnography to the theoretical frameworks we use (see Ingold 2012 for a review). One of the most central has been the ongoing divide between symbolic and materialist approaches to anthropology. What began as a difference between those who saw meaning as inhabiting material – and materialist – structures and those who sought to portray meaning as emergent from human interaction is the foundation, for instance, of contemporary struggles between cognitivists, who see meaning arising from brains and their conditioning, and social constructivists, who stress the variability of human experience and practice and the essential role of socialization in producing cultural differences. This divide has had and continues to have deep implications for how we conceive of the materiality of language, as well as the nature of anthropology and the study of humanity more broadly, issues expanded on by Keane and Silverstein (see Chapter 2).

In the 1960s, symbolic anthropology emerged from efforts to unravel the material problem of understanding others' schemes of comprehension, such as, for instance, regarding cargo cults, which had been portrayed as "irrational" when viewed from a Western, non-indigenous viewpoint. Clifford Geertz, Victor Turner, and other sociocultural anthropologists argued for understanding culture as the product of human activities that produce meaning. This move was also a response to prominent modes of thinking at the time, especially two that were most dominant: Noam Chomsky's universalist conceptualizations of human mind and knowledge, embedded within behaviorist models of human activity, and Marvin Harris's cultural materialist school of thought, which looked past human explanations for their behaviors to find meaning in the environmental base. This conflict among symbolic anthropological, cognitivist, and cultural materialist approaches to analyzing human action was rooted in very different conceptualizations of human subjectivity, a debate that in the Western scholarly tradition goes back at least to the work of Immanuel Kant, John Locke, and emerging traditions of empiricism (see Bauman and Briggs 2003, on aspects of this intellectual history). The conflict centered on such questions as how and where meaning gets created and where it exists. And, similar to Whorf's conceptualization of worldview, symbolic anthropologists

went beyond the question of whether categories that make the world meaningful exist in the human mind to ponder whether they formed through interaction with the world.

In some senses, symbolic anthropology shared an agenda with structuralism, which also argued that the material world could be made sense of through looking at the meanings that humans made of it. Although the two shared a commitment to investigating cultural patterns, what they did not share were their way of theorizing this meaning and their stance on whether such meaning was culturally specific or universally shared. For structuralists, such as Claude Lévi-Strauss and Roland Barthes, inspired by the work of Saussure, meanings were organized into language-like structures, using phonological contrasts (that is, meaning as built through minimal differences across sounds and their placement within a system) as a model. The differences that such analyses captured were viewed as universal across humanity, a point of difference with Geertzian symbolic anthropology (Geertz 1973), which saw the webs of significance within which humanity swung to be culturally specific. For our purposes, it is interesting to note that matter, or the physical instantiation of things in the world, was implicated in structuralist inquiries in terms of its relation to systems of meaning, and it was taken into account when investigating meaning-making relationships between words and objects. Materiality itself, however, lurked just outside of the frame of these inquiries, serving as a background for meaning-making or as the basis on which distinctions within systems of meaning could be discerned. The raw, the cooked, and the rotten, for Lévi-Strauss (1966), were less qualities that adhere to things in the world than idealized notions materialized within cultural settings that found meaning in contradistinction to one another.

Whereas symbolic approaches to culture consolidated arguments that human subjectivity and experience are anchored in meaning-making, Chomsky's views conceptualized language as a formal system apart from cultural or environmental specificities or forces, a perspective that became ascendant in linguistics for several decades. For many who studied language, the material and social world became merely a setting for gathering linguistic data, not an integral part of how language worked. At the same time, political economic understandings of human experience, cultural materialism among them, concentrated on the materialist conditions under which humans lived and worked, finding meaning not in what or how people spoke, but in what they did and how they interacted with the material world. What mattered was how many cattle they kept or what they ate, not the stories they told, the names they gave themselves and others, or the ways in which they argued.

This legacy of materialism owes its debt to the agenda laid out by Marx and Engels. As quoted in the epigraph, they note that language is caught up in the material processes of production while it is also an essential dimension

of the "material intercourse" of everyday life. Arguing against the Hegelian view that ideas drive history, Marx and Engels' conceptualization of a materialist perspective on history and social conditions sought to put what humans do, not what they think, at the center of social inquiry. Materialist analyses of language, many building on the work of Raymond Williams (1977) and Pierre Bourdieu (1977), have been one arena in which the linguistic and the material have received equal attention. Both emphasized the role of language in shaping ideology and political economy, focusing their analytical gaze on how language is embedded within or plays a part in political economies. Williams sought to bring language within the purview of Marxist analyses and accordingly theorized it as both activity and permeated with history. As such, language could be seen as embedded within and participating in ideological formations and political economic processes. Bourdieu included language in his conceptualization of class formation and maintenance, placing it firmly within the marketplace as a form of capital.

Materiality is also a lens through which consumption and material culture studies emerged. Commodity consumption has been a fascination to those wishing to understand the indexical value of objects and their circulation, especially as this pertains to social value. Early work on conspicuous consumption (Veblen 1953), as well as other engagements with commodities, was rarely about objects alone, but about the material and social worlds of meaning in which they signaled prestige (Bourdieu 1984). The Birmingham school of cultural studies, for instance, examined how commodities were instrumental in the construction of subcultural styles and critical resistance (Hall and Jefferson 1993; Hebdige 1979). Taking a decidedly materialist, Marxist perspective on social reproduction (Willis 1977), members of this school highlighted the role of commodities in broader processes of social category formation. Commodities themselves could have "social lives" (Appadurai 1986), a formulation gesturing to the agency of material culture and its circulation (Gell 1986, 1988; Latour 1993). Even though these studies did not foreground language use, some conceived of consumption itself as a system of communicative signs (Baudrillard 1988). Though a "nonverbal medium" (Douglas and Isherwood 1996: 41), semiotic processes of iconicity and indexicality signaled consumption's semiotic potential – a point developed via a different intellectual lineage by anthropologists invested in semiotic anthropology (see Part I).

Consumption has been an intellectual preoccupation for several decades in the fields of sociology, cultural studies, and anthropology, among others; since the 1990s, anthropology has transitioned from a focus on commodities to material culture more broadly. Due in part to conceptions of materiality drawn from archaeology, via Daniel Miller (1998, 2005), as well as those of prominent art worlds and exchange theory, material culture studies encompasses the value and agency of objects in social systems of exchange as well as in capitalist