INTRODUCTION

Social relations vary across human societies in ways that are limitlessly varied, endlessly susceptible to reanalysis, periodic stabilization and change. Yet they are highly systematic in each locale for persons who recognize themselves as so related. The goal of this book is to show that such possibilities of variation and change, and their actual determinacy for particular social actors, can only be explained given an adequate conception of the role of language in human affairs. Doing so requires that we move beyond a variety of folk-views of language that exist among its users in particular times and places; for instance, that language is primarily a collection of words; that language is abstract, mental, devoid of materiality; that it stands apart from the 'things' that it inertly represents. We will be building towards a rather different conception of language here, a view that focuses on the materiality of language and its relationship to other material things, on classifications of behavior that can be inhabited through behavior, and on processes whereby classifications of behaviors, and of those whose behaviors they are, can be maintained or modified within the order of social interaction in which they are experienced.

It has often been supposed that the variability of social relations observed across societies and history can be tamed by means of various top-down approaches, as in the creation of taxonomies of 'kinds of society' viewed as explanations of what people do; or by enumeration of ever more abstract cognitive universals believed to constitute structures of mind independent of human action; or by resort to principles of functional explanation through which actions tend to certain equilibria and yield particular social formations as homeostatic results. There is no difficulty even today in making up such stories about society. The difficulty is, rather, that in order to appear plausible such accounts must ignore vast realms of human experience attested in the ethnographic and historical record, or harness such variation to evolutionist metaphors, or lay claim to the greater rationality of their own moment in the history of the human experiment even as this moment slips away.

This book builds in a different direction. I argue that the organization of social life is shaped by reflexive models of social life, models that are made

through human activities and inhabited through them, though not always by the same persons. If the term 'model' seems a bit abstract there are many other terms – idea, image, discourse, position, response, habit, ideology, practice – that are variously appropriate in its place. All these terms convey the notion of an enacted representation, a thing made somewhere through some activity conveying something about another. One of the curious things about language is that it allows us to formulate models of phenomena that are highly abstract, even timeless; one of the curious things about our folk-views of language is their tendency to neglect what is obvious to our senses, namely that any such representation, however general in import, must be conveyed by a perceivable thing – i.e., be materially embodied – in order to become known to someone, or communicable to another. These moments of being made, grasped, and communicated are the central moments through which reflexive models of language and culture have a social life at all. And persons who live by these models (or change them) do so only by participating in these moments.

These moments are of focal interest throughout this book. This focus does not replace other concerns. It orients them. I discuss a large number of traditional topics in this book, matters of longstanding interest to students of language, culture and society. But I propose that careful attention to such moments of making and unmaking allows us to solve many of the most vexing problems we face in conceptualizing our subject matter. Despite the fact that some reflexive models of human behavior perdure or persist through time, some even for a long while, and despite the fact that some among them persist through arrangements that formulate them as timeless, exceptionless, essential, dominant, and so on, the central and inescapable fact about human societies is the diversity of reflexive models of behavior that co-exist within each society (and thus across societies) at any given time. This diversity is partly a result of the fact that persons have interested stakes in – they seek to own, disown, maintain or re-evaluate – the models by which they live, though it has other sources too. Such diversity is the taxonomist's nightmare. But this is as it should be, because, when it comes to culture, taxonomy is taxidermy.

Our goal here is to consider culture as a living process, as a thing whose arrangements are continually renewed – though not always at the same rate, or all at once – through the form-giving fire of human activities. The notion of activity relevant here is semiotic activity – the use of enacted representations in the sense discussed above – through which reflexive models of behavior are made, inhabited, and re-made by the semiotic labor of persons oriented to historical institutions. In many ways, this book is an attempt to argue that human activities yield material precipitates and projections (things made through activity, 'artifacts' of various kinds) that carry semiotic value or significance to those who perceive

them. This point is fairly obvious for the case of durable artifacts. Yet human beings make artifacts of different degrees of durability, whose cultural meanings and consequences persist for different scales of time. If human beings are artifact makers, the artifacts they most readily make are enacted representations, including utterances and discourses. As individuals, we do this countless times a day and think nothing of it; but those patterns of individual activity that we call institutions do it in a more complex, sometimes puzzling way, and often with far greater consequence. It is therefore all the more important to see that utterances and discourses are themselves material objects made through human activity – made, in a physical sense, out of vibrating columns of air, ink on paper, pixels in electronic media – which exercise real effects upon our senses, minds, and modes of social organization, and to learn to understand and analyze these effects. It is true that utterances and discourses are artifacts of a more or less evanescent kind (speech more than writing). But these are questions of duration, not materiality, and certainly not of degree or kind of cultural consequence. Things that last for seconds can have effects that last for years. Even physical tokens of discourse that have a fleeting durational existence (such as spoken utterances) can order and shape social relations of a much more perduring kind, ones that persist far longer than the initial speech token itself, whether through uptake in the subsequent activities of others, by incorporation into widely routinized practices that rely on and replay them, or by conversion into artifacts of a more durable kind. Every argument in this book assumes the materiality of language and other signs. But I reject the privileged status typically accorded in contemporary discussions of materiality to the narrow special case of durable objects. Such an emphasis, which fixates on the physical persistence of the durable object, obscures the processes through which its sign-values emerge or change. Last year's hat doesn't make the same fashion statement this year. It's the same hat. Or is it? Everyone agrees that fleeting signs (such as spoken utterances and gestures) acquire contextual significance from their more durable physical setting. It remains to be seen that the semiotic values of durable objects (the kinds of things one can put on the mantelpiece, or trip over in the dark) are illuminated for their users by discourses that appear evanescent even when their effects are not. In this book, I attempt to make clearer attributes of language that shape the significance of perceivable objects across thresholds of durability in various ways, whether by allowing fleeting signs to borrow significance from ones that persist, or vice versa, or by making evanescent sign-values more durable, or by causing enduring cultural phenomena to fade into disrepute and disuse. It will soon become clear that many of these attributes make language so exquisite an instrument for doing work – for acting and interacting, for making and unmaking, for imbuing objects

(including discourse itself) with value – that its products, or 'works,' are far more accessible to our everyday awareness than the instrument itself.

Chapter 1 introduces basic concepts of reflexive activity, its varieties, and a way of conceptualizing the scales of sociohistorical process in which its effects (products, models, 'works') are experienced. Chapter 2 develops themes pertaining to the issue of enacted representation, the character of acts of referring (to 'things') as interpersonal achievements, the sociology of denotation, and the normativity and authority of forms of representation. Chapter 3 develops an account of register formations, viewed now as systems of socially significant signs (involving language and non-language) that are formed, maintained, and reanalyzed through reflexive activities. The account presented in these three chapters expands our conception of what a register is (beyond the traditional view that registers are sets of socially valued words and expressions) to a model where the kinds of signs that comprise registers, the processes of valorization that establish their sign-values, and the persons for whom they function as signs are all shown to be features of a register not fixed once and for all but variables whose values are defined and negotiated through reflexive processes within social life. These aspects of the model allow us to conceptualize register formations as *cultural models of action*, as stereotypic ways of performing 'social acts' of enormous range and variety, a variety exhibited not merely in their intelligible social consequences but also in the range of phenomenal behaviors in which they are embodied.

Chapter 4 develops an account of enregisterment, the process whereby one register formation comes to be distinguished from other modes of activity, including other registers, and endowed with specific performable values. Whereas all the other chapters in the book take a comparative look at phenomena in different languages and societies, the comparative focus of Chapter 4 is on different historical periods of a single language/society. The next few chapters examine different types of enregistered signs. Chapter 5 focuses on the social logics that underlie enregistered emblems of 'identity,' and on matters of self- and other-positioning that emerge out of these logics. Chapters 6 and 7 take up honorific register formations, cases where enregistered signs are linked in ideologically explicit ways to matters of respect, status, power and rank. Chapter 8 discusses processes of enregisterment that bear on matters of kinship. The chapter illustrates the enormous range of interpersonal relations that can be established through kinship behaviors (the use of kinterms and associated non-linguistic signs), both behaviors that conform to norms of kinship and those that trope upon them. Behaviors of the latter kind establish forms of propinquity that are 'kinship-like' only in certain respects, but which, through further processes of reflexive reanalysis, can be re-evaluated as new norms

of kinship for certain social purposes, thereby resetting the standard to which further analogues of kinship are referred.

This dialectic of norm and trope is central to social processes discussed throughout this book. The sense in which social processes are *limitlessly* varied, as I claimed in my opening sentence, is not that they vary randomly or that 'anything goes.' This is far from the case. To see this we have to recognize two distinct issues. First, although cultural models are often normalized by social practices so as to constitute routine versions of (even normative models for) the social behaviors of which they are models, they can also be manipulated through tropes performed by persons acquainted with such models to yield variant versions, and the range of these tropic variations is potentially limitless. The second point is this. The existence of cultural models and tropic variants also involves sociological asymmetries. Not all norms that exist in a society are recognized or accepted by all members of that society. Similarly, not all behaviors that trope upon norms occur equally routinely or are intelligible equally widely; not all intelligible tropes are ratified by those who can construe them; not all the ones that are ratified come to be presupposed in wider social practices, or get normalized in ways that get widely known. Each of these asymmetries imposes some further structure on the first process I described. I argue in this book that if we understand this dialectic of norm and trope in semiotic terms, and if we know how to study these asymmetries in sociological terms, the fact that cultural models vary in (potentially) limitless ways is no cause for distress. Rather, a recognition of this fact and the ability to explain its consequences helps us to understand better the sense in which culture is an open project, the ways in which forms of social organization are modifiable through human activities, and, through a recognition of the various 'positionalities' generated by these asymmetries, to recognize that the processes whereby cultural variation comes about make untenable any form of radical relativism that presumes the perfect intersubstitutability of social 'positions.'

I use the expression 'a language' in this book to refer to the kinds of phenomena to which we ordinarily refer by means of words like French, Chinese, Arabic, or Tagalog. The term has no further technical specificity. None is needed since more precise claims about reflexive processes are formulated in the terminology of sign-functions introduced in Chapter 1. When I use the generic term 'language,' my intent is to say: Pick any language that you like. But I do not use this term for what is called 'Language' by some linguists ('grammar' will do here; more on this below); if my arguments prove persuasive, the epistemological status of the capital-L construct will need to be re-thought. I specifically refer to matters of grammar and grammatical organization by using those terms. Other more specific terms like 'dialect' and 'sociolect' are introduced in the text.

A different set of considerations apply to the term language 'use.' The term is an imperfect way of talking about events of semiosis in which language occurs. As we examine the orderliness of such events we find that there are several ways in which the unity of this construct, this thing called language 'use,' breaks down. First, the term 'use' is itself ambiguous between an act of performing an utterance and an act of construing it; here 'use' breaks down into 'performance and construal' or 'act and response.' Second, to say that language is being used is generally to point to the fact that an array of signs is being performed and construed by interactants, of which language is but a fragment; when language occurs in 'use,' it occurs typically as a fragment of a multi-channel sign configuration, whose performance and construal, enactment and response, constitutes the minimal, elementary social fact. Third, much of what is traditionally called the data of 'usage' by linguists and others consists, in fact, of the data of reflexive models of usage (e.g., norms and standards of usage) to which the actual practice of using language does not always conform even in the society where such data are gathered. These issues require that we distinguish different varieties of usage – an instance of usage, a habitual usage, a normative usage, a tropic usage – in conceptualizing the kinds of work that is accomplishable through language itself.

This book presents methods and frameworks for analyzing many aspects of language. I offer extended discussion of examples from a variety of linguistic and sociohistorical locales, relying on the work of many others. Many of these data are summarized in tables, with source authors and texts indicated at the bottom of the table. At various points in the exposition I have found it convenient to highlight certain features of the argument by setting them off from the text as summaries of the discussion. These are cross-referenced in the text with a preceding S for summary by chapter and summary number (as S 1.1, S 1.2, etc., in Chapter 1, and so on). I have tended to highlight by way of summary those features of the discussion in a particular chapter to which discussions in other chapters make reference. The intention is to provide pointers and flags foregrounding a few selected themes so that the reader can re-visit issues which animate discussions elsewhere in the book. In all cases the summaries offer synopses of points discussed and exemplified at greater length in the body of the text. But they differ among themselves in other respects. In most cases the summaries occur immediately after the discussion summarized. In a few cases, they highlight themes preemptively, offering synopses of materials that follow in the next two or three pages. In one or two instances the summary highlights issues discussed in a previous chapter in order to formulate a bridge or connection to the material now at hand. Although these summaries always offer a synopsis of issues illustrated by examples, they sometimes state synopses in formulations more general

than local examples appear to warrant; this is invariably because the local examples are instances of a more general phenomenon, of which additional examples from many languages and societies, cross-referenced to the summary, occur later. So whereas all of these summaries have a common expository function (that they are synopses of local parts of the text) they are also variously, and additionally, flags, pointers, connectors, bridges to other parts of the text, and sometimes generalizations which unite together different portions of a more extended argument. The reader may be able to use these summaries in various ways. But they are not intended as self-standing claims isolable from the empirical cases which furnish their point, nor as adipose verities of some armchair theory in which we may come to find some everlasting rest (which is when they would become most adipose).

A great deal of ink has been spilled in the last forty years in pursuing the assumption that the study of language is the study of 'rules' or 'constraints' on language. As with any fad, the time for this one has come and gone. There is a simple trick that forms the basis for – and explains the popularity of – the fad. The trick itself has two parts. Here's how to do it. First, redefine what the word language means, preferably fixating upon a fragment or feature of language – let's say the concatenation system of language, its syntactic and phonotactic aspects – and call this fragment 'language' (or even 'Language'). Second, redefine the study of this fragment as the study of some restricted type of data about it, let's say the study of decontextualized intuitions about it. If you've done this carefully enough, you can now amaze and amuse your friends by pulling a vast number of rules and constraints out of the hat of introspectable intuitions. And, now, the statement 'the study of language is the study of constraints' appears to be true. But a more accurate way of stating this truth is 'the study of decontextualized intuitions can isolate plenty of features of a concatenation system that appear as inviolable constraints to those intuitions.' You can also do this for discourse. So, in your first step, you can redefine 'discourse' as some genre of discourse, let's say 'conversation.' And in your second step, you can define your privileged data type as 'transcripts of conversation.' You can now come up with all kinds of formalizable constraints on discourse itself – the examples are right there, after all, in those very transcripts! – and appear to prove that the study of discourse is the study of constraints on conversation structure as long as you don't worry about the question: For whom?

Suppose now that someone else does this, and you are part of the audience. Even if you spot the trick, you will find yourself in an awkward position. You might for instance find yourself inhabiting what Nietzsche calls a 'reactive' position, a position defined by the thing to which you are reacting. You might for instance find yourself saying 'there are no rules or constraints' or 'there's no such thing as syntax' or 'conversation has no

structure' or something along these lines. This would be an over-reaction. The real issue is that if the study of language proceeds by fetishizing restricted data about fragments of language the possibility that such a study could reveal something about social relations among persons across diverse languages and cultures simply vanishes. A better response is to locate the narrowed purview within a wider one. To observe, for example, that when syntacticians claim to describe the concatenation rules of a 'language' they are not describing a language at all, but only a socially locatable register of a language (often the register called 'the Standard Language'), and the question of how they come to have any particular intuitions about it is part of what a social theory of language must explain. Or to observe that when the role of discourse in society is approached from the standpoint of some specific genre, such as 'face to face conversation,' the models identified as models of discourse make opaque discursive processes that connect persons at different scales of social grouping and historical time *through* that conversational encounter, but also through encounters whose genre characteristics are entirely different. An even better response is to make explicit the limits within which specific theories of language can explain aspects of it, so that the fruits of attachment to singular ideals can be enjoyed without nearby fields falling fallow. These are issues I take up in more detail later, especially in Chapters 1 and 2.

We shall do better to think of semiotic norms of language not as rules or constraints but as conditions on the construal of messages as signs. Such conditions are only satisfied for persons *for whom* these messages function as signs. You may not know the language your interlocutors are using. Or you may know it quite well, but speak a different register of it, and be inclined to call the register they are using by a specific name ('legalese' or 'baby talk,' for instance) and get only part of their gist. Every such register of a language has a describable grammar, which may differ only fractionally from Standard register, if a Standard exists, and only in some limited structural realm, such as lexicon or phonology; but this *fractional difference* itself conveys social information, is itself diacritic of social contrasts, which may also become commodified in various ways, even named as emblems of distinct social identities. Issues of register difference are discussed in Chapter 3. The social life of such commodity forms is the main focus of Chapter 4. And issues pertaining to social diacritics, emblems and identities is the topic of Chapter 5.

Reflexive operations can fractionally transform a norm, and such operations can recursively be iterated through further semiotic activity. This point is implicit in what I said earlier about the dialectic of norm and trope. Much of the complexity of the ways in which language can clarify social relations for users derives from the capacity of language users to acquire a reflexive grasp of particular aspects of a semiotic norm – *what* the norm is,

for whom it is a norm, *when* the norm applies, and so on – and to treat such a reflexive grasp as a subsequent basis for communicating messages, even when the message consists of the act of upholding a contrastive norm as a diacritic of self. If we approach these issues by taking a 'view from nowhere' (Nagel 1986), we end up right there. Nowhere. We can only study the intelligibility of social relations for social actors by making reflexive processes a central focus of the study. The two-fold approach I suggested earlier – a linguistically informed approach to the semiotic character of these processes, and an ethnographically informed approach to the sociological positions they generate – helps us see that radical relativism (much like Platonic realism) is just a variant of the view from nowhere.

Aside from issues of reflexivity, three broad themes inform discussions of semiotic processes throughout this book. The first one is that language and non-language are intermingled with each other in communicative acts in ways more varied and intimate than common sense suggests. Much of the goal of the first two chapters is to make clear that these relationships, though diverse, can be characterized in precise ways. A second broad theme is that cultural formations are reproduced over social groups through communicative processes that unfold one participation framework at a time. It is sometimes supposed that culture is reproduced through communication in discrete and invariant 'concept'-sized chunks. Yet if cultural representations are formulated through semiotic acts, they become communicable only through participation frameworks. Hence to acquire them is to take a footing with respect to them. If cultural representations 'move' through space and time through semiotic activities they do so only through the footholds they find in participation frameworks. These footings and footholds reshape and resize them in various ways. I argue at a number of points in this book that, given their orientation to participation frameworks, semiotic acts (of whatever representational character) themselves generate various roles (stakes, stances, positions, identities), and relationships among roles (alignments, asymmetries, power, hierarchy). I discuss several different ways in which such effects, of different degrees of constancy or evanescence, can emerge, the semiotic conditions under which they do so, and the kinds of processes through which they are made to last, or are undone. In Chapter 2, I show that differential uses of a grammatical system itself generates types of asymmetry in society. Other mechanisms of footing and role alignment are discussed in Chapters 3 and 4. In Chapter 5 I discuss this issue in more generalized terms, showing that *any* perceivable behavior, whether linguistic or non-linguistic, can make facts of 'positionality' palpable in social interaction. The goal of these discussions is to make clear that semiotic activity generates roles and relationships in several, rather different ways, and

that these require different kinds of analyses; and that we can study these phenomena in as careful a way as we like by attending to the thing to which interactants attend, namely semiotic activity itself.

A third broad theme is that language mediates social relations not only among persons who are co-present but also among persons separated from each other in time and space. Social relations are mediated by signs that connect persons to each other, allowing persons to engage with each other by engaging with signs that connect them in a semiotic encounter. What makes something a semiotic encounter in my sense is not the fact the people meet each other or come together in face to face settings. (Sometimes they do, of course, and when they do, we have the special case of face to face encounters. But this is just one possibility among many.) What makes something a **semiotic encounter** is the fact that a particular sign-phenomenon or communicative process connects persons to each other. (Even in the special case of face to face encounters it is not the fact of co-presence but the fact that one person's semiotic activity is audible and visible to another that creates the possibility of social interaction; blindfolds and earplugs readily dispose of this possibility even when co-presence is maintained.) Persons encounter each other by encountering signs that connect them to each other. They may encounter each other to different degrees. In our electronic age, persons are connected to each other in semiotic encounters of varying degrees of directness, immediacy, mutual awareness, and possible reciprocation. Each of us encounters countless others indirectly in mass media representations. Many encounters are non-immediate in the sense that they involve intermediaries (known or unknown) that relay messages serially across a chain of communicative events. It is now commonplace for millions of persons to simultaneously inhabit a single interactional role without having any awareness of each other's existence (e.g., a mass television 'audience'). And although social interaction is sometimes reciprocal – i.e., all parties have the entitlement or opportunity to respond to those who engage them – this is not always the case in either face to face or electronically mediated interactions. Persons may thus be connected to each other through signs at varying degrees of separation by criteria of co-presence, directness, intermediation, mutual awareness, and the capacity to respond to each other. And language mediates social relations of diverse types across all such cases. These issues are introduced in 1.6 and developed further in later chapters.

Taking reflexive processes seriously also helps us get beyond some unproductive conundrums that haunt social theory. One of these is the so-called micro-/macro- divide. Each side has its proponents. Some social theorists believe that the micro-analysis of interaction if pursued relentlessly enough may one day help explain large scale issues that matter to all