LANGUAGE IN CULTURE

Lectures on the Social Semiotics of Language

Language enables us to represent our world, rendering salient the identities, groups, and categories that constitute social life. Michael Silverstein (1945–2020) was at the forefront of the study of language in culture, and this book unifies a lifetime of his conceptual innovations in a set of seminal lectures. Focusing not just on what people say but how we say it, Silverstein shows how discourse unfolds in interaction. At the same time, he reveals that discourse far exceeds discrete events, stabilizing and transforming societies, politics, and markets through chains of activity. Presenting his magisterial theoretical vision in engaging prose, Silverstein unpacks technical terms through myriad examples – from brilliant readings of Marcel Marceau’s pantomime, the class-laced banter of graduate students, and the poetics/politics of wine-tasting, to Fijian gossip and US courtroom talk. He draws on forebears in linguistics and anthropology while offering his distinctive semiotic approach, redefining how we think about language and culture.

Michael Silverstein (1945–2020) was the Charles F. Grey Distinguished Service Professor of Anthropology, Linguistics and Psychology at the University of Chicago. His groundbreaking semiotic programme was shared with hundreds of students through his Language in Culture course, which he taught for almost fifty years and is distilled in this book. Silverstein was awarded a MacArthur fellowship in 1982 and the Franz Boas Award for Exemplary Service to Anthropology in 2014. Dedicated to growing the field of linguistic anthropology, he was a president of the Society of Linguistic Anthropology, and the founding Director of the Center for the Study of Communication and Society.
“Brilliant, comprehensive, and always thought-provoking, *Language in Culture* is a truly singular contribution. Silverstein has brought his subtle and elegantly laid-out theoretical approach together with the acute and generative exploration of detailed exemplary cases – and always in his own distinctive and engaging voice. This is bound to be an immediate classic of lasting resonance.”

Don Brenneis, Distinguished Professor of Anthropology Emeritus, University of California, Santa Cruz

“This treasure of a book lays out the total linguistic fact, with all of Silverstein’s classic brilliance, erudition, and mischievousness.”

Penelope Eckert, Albert Ray Lang Professor Emerita, Stanford University

“It’s difficult to find words to characterize adequately Michael Silverstein’s genius, or the significance of his work. He is a singular figure. It’s tempting to think of him as a kind of Saussure for our century, except that, as this elegantly constructed volume reveals, Silverstein disassembles Saussure’s framework and uses the component parts – along with myriad elements from elsewhere (Peirce, Whorf, Sapir, Jakobson, Bakhtin, and many others) – to build a wondrous new construction that allows a breathtakingly rich view of how language works and of what happens when we use it.”

Michael Lucey, Sidney and Margaret Ancker Professor of Comparative Literature and French, University of California, Berkeley

“With his signature searing clarity and punning wit, Michael Silverstein at long last lays out in print what decades of students have heard – the detailed, layered, and at once remarkably robust and subtle semiotic mechanisms through which we co-construct our worlds, or wreck them, hold them in a precarious order or teeter off course.”

Elizabeth A. Povinelli, Franz Boas Professor of Anthropology & Gender Studies, Columbia University
LANGUAGE IN CULTURE

Lectures on the Social Semiotics of Language

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Foreword

by Mara Tapp

There is nothing ordinary about this book. It began in the mind of Michael Silverstein, my husband and greatest love, when he first arrived at the University of Chicago in fall 1970, charged with teaching “Language and Culture,” an introductory course, to Anthropology graduate students. The first move he made was to rename the course “Language in Culture.” This change captured his view of the role language plays in our lives, and offered a key to his past and future scholarship and teaching, not to mention his insistence on the inseparability of language and culture, a philosophy to which he would convert as many as possible for the rest of his life. Over the five decades in which U of C was Michael’s intellectual home, he taught this course nearly every year to anthropology and linguistics students. Michael was delighted that his former students now teach it all over the world.

In 2017 he decided to organize his “Language in Culture” course into eight lectures for the Linguistic Institute of the Linguistic Society of America in Lexington, Kentucky. He delivered them that summer. Then, heeding long-standing requests from colleagues and students, Michael embarked on transforming those lectures into a book, drawing on his fifty years teaching an ever-evolving course that had become so identified with him. His intention was that this volume would be less technical than his usual work, and therefore more appealing to a wider audience.

In the meantime, Michael had been invited to give the Nora and Edward Ryerson Lecture, an honor bestowed by the U of C to celebrate the scholarship of a small corps of distinguished faculty. He decided to include that text in the book as the basis of its Introduction. Before he could deliver his lecture, Michael was diagnosed with terminal brain cancer that ended his life in just over a year. He wanted very much to finish this book but understood that might not be possible. Several close colleagues offered a solution. They proposed to carry out several workshops, a format Michael
favored, in which they and others would critique his manuscript in its raw form, as a means of helping him to finish it. He was touched, and immediately dubbed this corps “Michael’s Book Posse.” It met three times, and was an extraordinary intellectual gift of respect and love, a way to acknowledge and return his decades of engaging with and commenting on their work.

Tragically, Michael was not able to finish the book before he died on July 17, 2020. The three colleagues who had come up with the Book Posse idea, E. Summerson Carr, Susan Gal, and Constantine V. Nakassis, stepped up and used its meeting transcripts, full of Michael’s characteristically expansive amplifications on and explanations of his ideas and lectures, and his earlier publications, to inform this work, completing the task of taking it from lectures to book. That approach brought both Michael’s ideas and his voice back to life in this, his new last work. My gratitude is profound for the monumental efforts, and the immensity and generosity of this gift from this organizing trio and all members of Michael’s Book Posse – Asif Agha, Richard Bauman, Judith T. Irvine, Michael Lempert, John Lucy, Paul Manning, Elizabeth Mertz, Robert Moore, and Kristina Wirtz. As a final step, I asked two former students of Michael’s, both close colleagues and friends, Nicholas Harkness and Robert Moore, to review the completed manuscript. To them, I am also deeply grateful.

I, along with many of Michael’s colleagues and former students, now colleagues, believed his best work was ahead of him. He intended to retire when he turned seventy-five in September 2020 so that he could devote more time to his scholarship and personal life. Michael’s work is very technical, but his goal always was to help people to understand how language really works. The infectiousness of his love of language, and the way it functions in human relations around the world, is present on every page of this book. In his last year Michael said that he was able to connect his early works to his later ones, creating a lifetime arc of his thoughts and scholarship. This book, then, is the actualization of the beginning of that effort, offering a sense of the sum of where he was intellectually shortly before he died. One could argue that Michael’s legacy starts with these “Language in Culture” lectures, first imagined when he was twenty-five, initially in the haze of a drug-induced hospital confinement and then a lengthy recovery from surgery for an ankle injury that happened while playing frisbee on the first day of fieldwork in 1970. He built the Language in Culture legacy, refining it over five decades. Now it will continue to be carried on in the work of his former students, whom he welcomed with
enthusiasm to their shared profession and whose scholarly contributions made him so proud, of his colleagues, and of all the others he encountered who were intellectually, philosophically, ethically, and morally touched by him. In these ways, Michael lives on. For that I am grateful beyond words or imagining. Michael would have been too, and he would have found the perfect words to express that.
Preface

In presenting these lectures to the reader I want to use our time together to sketch the intellectual adventure I’ve been on, along with students and colleagues, for about fifty years now – an adventure, I gratefully say, stimulated that long ago by an invitation out of the blue from the University of Chicago to teach a graduate course on “Language in Culture” during a visiting assistant professorship in Autumn Quarter, 1970. This set of lectures is an abbreviated version of that course – most recently taught at the 2017 Linguistic Society of America Linguistic Institute held at the University of Kentucky’s Lexington campus in eight ca. eighty-minute sessions (versus the twenty two-hour lectures of the full course) – as its message has crystallized over the many intervening years.

Over the course of my career, I have drawn together strands of linguistic theory I was first exposed to in interaction with my Harvard teacher, Roman Jakobson, through whom I was introduced to the semiotics of Charles Sanders Peirce and as well to Jakobson’s re-fashioning of Moscow and Prague formalist poetics. At Chicago I was welcomed into a heady intellectual milieu of all my then-senior sociocultural anthropologist colleagues eager to understand the symbols and meanings of culture – symbols and meanings most clearly at issue in the central foci of anthropological investigation: ritual. The following lectures were written and refined over a career of these stimulating interactions and outline my approach to linguistic anthropology, that is, to the semiotics of language in culture.