Linguistic anthropology

Alessandro Duranti

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In this innovative textbook Alessandro Duranti introduces linguistic anthropology as an interdisciplinary field which studies language as a cultural resource and speaking as a cultural practice. He shows that it relies on ethnography as an essential element of linguistic analyses, and that it draws its intellectual inspiration from interactionally oriented perspectives on human activity and understanding. Unlike other current accounts of the subject, it emphasizes that communicative practices are constitutive of the culture of everyday life and that language is a powerful tool rather than a simple mirror of pre-established social realities. An entire chapter is devoted to the notion of culture, and there are invaluable methodological chapters on ethnography and transcription. The theories and methods of linguistic anthropology are introduced through a discussion of linguistic diversity, grammar in use, the role of speaking in social interaction, the organization and meaning of conversational structures, and the notion of participation as a unit of analysis.

Original in its treatment and yet eminently clear and readable, *Linguistic Anthropology* will appeal to upper-level undergraduate and graduate students.

CAMBRIDGE TEXTBOOKS IN LINGUISTICS

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LINGUISTIC ANTHROPOLOGY

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LINGUISTIC ANTHROPOLOGY

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To my students

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PREFACE

Linguistic anthropology has undergone a considerable transformation in the last few decades. In this book I present some of the main features of this transformation. Rather than striving for a comprehensive treatise of what linguistic anthropology has been up to now, I have been very selective and often avoided topics that could have reinforced what I see as a frequent stereotype of linguistic anthropologists, namely, descriptive, non-theoretically oriented, technicians who know about phonemic analysis, historical linguistics, and "exotic" languages and can teach these subjects to anthropology students who may be wary of taking courses in linguistics departments. Rather than a comprehensive "everything-you-always-wanted-to-know-about-language-but-were-afraid-to-ask" for cultural anthropologists and other social scientists, this volume is conceived as a statement about contemporary research on language and culture from a particular point of view. This view is my own but it also echoes the work of a number of productive researchers in departments of anthropology, linguistics, applied linguistics, sociology, folklore, performance studies, philosophy, ethnomusicology, and communication. Whether or not they see themselves as doing linguistic anthropology, the researchers from whose work I extensively drew are all concerned with the study of language as a cultural resource and with speaking as a cultural practice, rely on ethnography as an essential element of their analyses and find intellectual inspiration from a variety of philosophical sources in the social sciences and the humanities. What unites them is the emphasis on communicative practices as constitutive of the culture of everyday life and a view of language as a powerful tool rather than a mirror of social realities established elsewhere.

The focus on the history, logic, and ethics of research found in this book is unusual in linguistics but common among anthropologists, who have long been concerned with the politics of representation and the effects of their work on the communities they study.

Like any other writer of introductory books, for every chapter, section, or paragraph I had to choose among dozens of possible ways of presenting a

concept, making connections with other fields, or finding appropriate examples from the literature or my own research experience. Simplicity of exposition and recognition of historical sources were often in conflict and I am aware of the fact that I have not given adequate space to many important authors and topics. In particular, I said very little about three areas that are traditionally associated with linguistic anthropology, namely, language change, areal linguistics, and pidgins and creoles. These and related topics are however dealt with in other volumes in this series such as Hudson's *Sociolinguistics* and Bynon's *Historical Linguistics*. I have also said relatively little about such classic pragmatic notions as conversational implicatures and presuppositions; these themes receive adequate attention in Levinson's *Pragmatics* and Brown and Yule's *Discourse Analysis*, also in this series. Finally, I hardly touched the burgeoning literature on language socialization and did not include the impressive body of work currently devoted to literacy and education. I hope that future volumes in the series will develop these important areas to the readers' satisfaction.

There is another way in which this volume complements the other volumes in the series, namely, in the attention given to culture and the methods for its study. I have dedicated an entire chapter to current theories of culture. I have also written two methods chapters: one on ethnography and the other on transcribing live discourse. Finally, I have discussed several paradigms – structuralist analysis, speech act theory, conversation analysis – from the point of view of their contribution to an anthropological theory of language.

The book is aimed at upper-division undergraduate courses and introductory graduate seminars on linguistic anthropology or (as they are often called) "language *and* (or *in*) culture" courses. Instructors who like challenges should be able to experiment with at least some of the chapters for lower division classes that deal with culture and communication. I have for instance used the chapters on theories of cultures and ethnography with some success with freshmen. I also believe that instructors can easily remedy whatever thematic, methodological, and theoretical lacunae they will detect in the book by integrating its chapters with additional articles or monographs in linguistic anthropology. Finally, all chapters are written to stand on their own. Hence, students and researchers interested in selected issues or paradigms should be able to read selectively without feeling lost.

When I was an undergraduate student at the University of Rome, one day I discovered a small library on the third floor of the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy. It was filled with books and journals about languages, many of which had names I had never heard before. As I became acquainted with the people who frequented that library – instructors, students, and visiting scholars from other parts of Italy or from other countries –, I also developed a sense of

curiosity for the knowledge contained in those rich descriptions of linguistic phe-nomena. My later experiences – as a graduate student, fieldworker, university researcher, and teacher – have not altered that earlier curiosity for linguistic forms and their description. In the meantime, I have also developed something new: a commitment to understanding language as the voice, tool, and foundation for any human experience. It is this commitment that I have tried to articulate in this book.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Acknowledgments

on linguistics, computers as tools, and film theory and production. These appointments and the people I interacted with kept me intellectually engaged and hopeful during difficult years, when I wasn't sure I would be able to stay in academia. My appointment in linguistic anthropology at the University of California, Los Angeles, in 1988 provided an ideal working environment that has recently culminated with the establishment of an interdisciplinary center for the study of language, interaction, and culture. It is quite obvious to me that this book is partly coauthored by the voices and ideas of the many scholars I interacted with in these and other institutions over more than two decades. Among them, I owe the most to one person: my wife Elinor Ochs, the most creative linguistic anthropologist I have ever met. From our fieldwork experience in Western Samoa to the postdoctoral fellowship at ANU and all the way to the more recent years together at UCLA, Elinor has shown me again and again how to transform primitive intuitions and precarious associations into stories that can be shared with an audience. I hope this book will be one of those stories.

A number of people generously gave me feedback on earlier drafts. Elizabeth Keating worked as my editor for my first draft, providing many crucial insights on content and format; Rowanne Henry, Jennifer Schlegel, and Diana Wilson gave me useful comments on several chapters; Jennifer Reynolds and Melissa Lefko Foutz helped me locate references. Special thanks go to Asif Agha and Lisa Capps for many detailed suggestions and positive reinforcement on my second draft. Finally, I owe a great deal to four colleagues who acted as reviewers for Cambridge University Press: Jane Hill (who carefully read and gave feedback on two drafts), Paul Garrett, Susanne Romaine, and Bambi Schieffelin. Their comments and questions made the text more readable and hopefully more useful. Any remaining shortcomings are, of course, my own responsibility.

The idea of this book came out of a conversation at the Congo Cafe in Santa Monica with my editor Judith Ayling in the Spring of 1992. She didn't know then how much work – including countless messages over electronic mail – this would cost her. I am very thankful to Judith for her encouragement and her wise decisions at different stages of this project.

The less obvious and yet most important help in writing this book came from my family. The warm and stimulating environment Elinor and I routinely enjoy in our house owes a great deal to our son Marco's affection, generosity, and unique thirst for learning. My parents' emotional and material support in running our household during the winter, when they come to stay with us in California, is invaluable. Between Christmas and Easter, I can afford to sit writing at the computer or reading an article only because I know that my mother is preparing a delicious dinner and my father is fixing the latest problem with the roof in some very original and inexpensive way.

1
The scope of linguistic anthropology

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

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

1.1 Definitions

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1.2   The study of linguistic practices

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

using interviews we would produce an infinite regress). Rather, we must look at how participants carry out their daily interactions and solve everyday problems such as getting along with others, making or maintaining friends, getting directions, giving orders, filling out forms, looking for jobs, paying traffic tickets. In engaging in these everyday activities, members first of all must often make available to others their own understanding of what is going on. Given that so much of mutual monitoring of what is going on in any given interaction is done through speech – as well as through other semiotic resources (e.g. gestures and postures, artifacts and documents of various sorts), language use has become an important area of study for ethnomethodologically oriented sociologists. Among them, conversation analysts have introduced ideas and methods that have been influential on many linguistic anthropologists interested in the sequential organization of everyday talk (see chapter 8).

Linguistic anthropologists have also benefited from the work of contemporary social theorists who pay particular attention to the constitution of society and culture in everyday life. This is particularly true of Bourdieu's (1977, 1990) practice theory, Anthony Giddens's (1979, 1984) structuration theory, and Michel Foucault's historical study of technologies of knowledge as technologies of power (e.g. 1973, 1979, 1980a, 1988).

Bourdieu has been particularly influential in the critique of culture as a rational system made up of beliefs or hierarchically organized rules. He has stressed the importance of socialization and the priority of our lived experience over our rationalization and thematization of distinct social categories and norms. This perspective, which attempts to integrate the Heideggerian theme of the primacy of our being-in-the-world with traditional social science methods,[8] provides a model of symbolic domination based on unconscious dispositions inculcated through participation in routine interactions rather than through cognitive processes ascribed to a rational subject.

In Giddens's view, social agents and social structures represent a temporally and spatially organized reproductive process whereby society provides resources for organizing the social life of its members while members' use of such resources in turn reproduces them. The idea of the structual properties of social systems as both medium and outcome of the practices they recursively organize – Giddens's principle of the "duality of structure" – is consistent with the perspective of linguistic anthropologists who view talk not simply as a medium for the representation of a language-independent reality but also as a ubiquitous resource for reproducing social reality, and hence existing relations of power and dependence.

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[8] As pointed out by Dreyfus (1991: 205), Heidegger and Bourdieu share the view that "much of human behavior could and does take place as ongoing skillful coping without the need for mental states (i.e. beliefs, desires, intentions, etc.)..."

Giddens's work on *regionalization*, defined as the "zoning of time-space in relation to routinized social practices" (Giddens 1984: 119) is particularly relevant to that of those linguistic anthropologists who are engaged in the analysis of how talk and material resources, including the built environment and other existing artifacts, are used by speakers in their daily interactions and communicative practices (see section 9.6). Synthesizing earlier work by Teun Hägerstrand and others, Giddens brought attention to how a living space like a house is a *locale*, a place that becomes "a 'station' for a large cluster of interactions in the course of a typical day. Houses in contemporary societies are regionalized into floors, halls and rooms. But the various rooms of the house are zoned differently in time as well as space" (1984: 119).

Space is the pervasive field of study and metaphor of social thought used by Foucault in his discussion of the relation between knowledge and power. For Foucault the nineteenth century was obsessed with history and hence with time and the twentieth century will be known as the epoch of space (Foucault 1980b; Soja 1989). To understand how knowledge is never neutral and always a form of power, Foucault suggests that we think of it in terms of spatial concepts such as "region, domain, implantation, displacement, transposition" (1980b: 69). Once we start doing this, we are faced with the political or militaristic connotations of such terms and we may then soon realize that such connotations are not accidental. They correspond to frames of reference that inform how we understand and use language within particular institutions.

Foucault uses the term "discourse" as something much wider than a text or a sequence of speech acts. Discourse, for Foucault, is a particular way of organizing knowledge through speech but also through other semiotic resources and practices (e.g. the way of conceptualizing and institutionalizing hygiene in eighteenth-century France) – this use explains why Foucault speaks of discourses (in the plural). This widening of the meaning of the term "discourse" has important consequences for anyone interested in the relationship between language and context, given that it draws attention to the fact that particular uses of language, particular speech acts (see chapter 7), turn sequences (see chapter 8), and participant frameworks (see chapter 9) are connected to particular spatio-temporal arrangements such that speakers have access to one another in limited spatial configurations and for limited periods of time. Finally, this emphasis on discourses as technologies of knowledge makes us aware of the role of language in institutional efforts (in schools, hospitals, prisons) to organize and hence control the private lives of members of society, including their conceptualizations of self, ethnic identity, and gender relations.

1.3.1 Linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics

Among the disciplines in the social sciences and humanities that study communication, sociolinguistics is the closest to linguistic anthropology. In fact, looking back at the history of the two disciplines, it is sometimes difficult to tell them apart. Although many sociolinguists favor quantitative methods and tend to work in urban environments whereas most linguistic anthropologists favor qualitative methods and tend to work in small scale societies, the overall goals of their research agendas appear very similar to outsiders – especially as more and more anthropologists turn their attention to urban contexts. Some of the differences between the two disciplines have to do with their history. Linguistic anthropology was one of the four subfields of anthropology when the discipline was officially defined by Boas and his colleagues at the beginning of the twentieth century (see section 3.1). Sociolinguistics came out of urban dialectology in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The closeness between the two disciplines was partly enhanced in the 1960s and 1970s by several efforts to merge them, including Dell Hymes's attempt to define an interdisciplinary field centered around *language use*. This is evident in the introduction to Gumperz and Hymes's (1964) collection, where Hymes worked hard at constituting the field of the **ethnography of communication** by creating links with almost everything one could think of at the time as even marginally relevant to the study of the interface between language and culture or language and society. When we examine the articles and authors included in the 1964 collection, we find the following fields represented: sociological linguistics (Bernstein), folklore (Arewa & Dundes), interactional sociolinguistics (Ervin-Tripp), comparative sociolinguistics (Ferguson), cognitive anthropology and ethnoscience (Frake), historical linguistics (Malkiel), quantitative sociolinguistics (Labov), and interactional (micro)sociology (Goffman). In the later collection (Gumperz and Hymes 1972), we find some of the same contributors with several additions, most notably, non-verbal (or kinesic) communication, represented by Birdwhistell, and the ethnomethodological school, represented by Garfinkel, Sacks, and Schegloff.

Gumperz and Hymes helped shape intellectual connections and collaborations that continue to be an important part of linguistic anthropology as an interdisciplinary field, but they did not succeed in the ecumenical effort to create a unified field in which all of the authors and schools mentioned above could recognize themselves. This becomes evident when we examine the main foci of theoretical interest in contemporary sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology.

Sociolinguists have continued to work on language choice and language change, while trying to engage in a dialogue with formal grammarians, with whom they share an interest in how to represent linguistic competence, while disagreeing on

the criteria by which to evaluate such competence and its boundaries. Socio-linguists also continue to be concerned with the definition of the speech community as a reference point for investigating the limits of individual variation in language use. For these intellectual pursuits, the study of phenomena like pidgins and creole languages or language planning have proved to be rich testing grounds.[9] Other areas of study, such as speech register, language and gender, speech acts, and discourse, have been more often shared with linguistic anthropologists and have thus provided opportunities for crossfertilization between the two disciplines. In addition to the importance of the concept of culture (see chapter 2), which alone makes linguistic anthropological methods and theoretical goals quite distinct from sociolinguistic research, there are a number of theoretical concerns that have developed as more uniquely associated with the work of linguistic anthropologists. I will turn to three of these concerns in the next sections.

1.4   Theoretical concerns in contemporary linguistic anthropology

There are three major theoretical areas that have been developed within linguistic anthropology in the last few decades. Each of these areas is devoted to the understanding of one of the following analytical notions: (i) performance, (ii) indexicality, and (iii) participation. As it will be made clear in the following discussion, the three notions are interconnected.

1.4.1   Performance

The concept of performance draws from a number of sources and can thus be interpreted in a number of ways. One use of the term originates in the theoretical work of Noam Chomsky and the distinction he made in *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (1965) between **competence** and **performance**. This distinction was in part inspired by de Saussure's contrast between *langue* and *parole* (Saussure 1959), with the first being the system as a whole, independent of particular uses by particular speakers, and the second the language of a particular user of the system. In this context, competence describes the capacity for language, that is, the knowledge – mostly unconscious – that a native speaker has of the principles that allow for the interpretation and use of a particular language. Performance, instead, is the actual use of a language and is not only seen by Chomsky as based upon competence but also following principles such as attention, perception, and memory which do not need to be invoked for the notion of competence as the abstract knowledge speakers have independent of their use of

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[9] See Hymes (1971), Jourdan (1991), Mülhäusler (1986), Romaine (1986, 1994: ch. 6), Thomason and Kaufman (1988). For a survey of the structure of pidgin and creole languages, see Holm (1988, 1989).

language.[10] Competence in this case is the knowledge of a language that an ideal speaker has.[11] Performance instead is the implementation of that knowledge in acts of speaking.

This notion of performance is different from the one used by the philosopher J. L. Austin (1962) in his category of *performative verbs*, which make explicit the type of action a particular utterance is trying to achieve (see chapter 7). In the utterance *I order you to leave the room* said by a person who has the authority to issue such a command to another who is in a position to execute the command, the verb *order* is not describing what the speaker believes to be true about an independently existing reality. It is instead an attempt to affect reality, by making it conform to the speaker's wants and expectations. This is an example of the ways in which words *do* things. For Austin, it turned out, all utterances do something, even those that seem to simply describe a state of affairs (the sky is blue). They do the job of informing.

There is no question that linguistic anthropologists are interested in what speakers *do* with language. In this sense, their work can be seen as falling either within Chomsky's notion of performance as "use of the linguistic system" or within Austin's notion of performance as the "doing of things with words." However, either one of these understandings of linguistic anthropologists' interest in performance would leave out a third and equally important sense of the term, which comes from folklore studies, poetics, and, more generally, the arts (Bauman 1992b; Bauman and Briggs 1992; Palmer and Jankowiak 1996). Performance in this sense refers to a domain of human action where special attention is given to the ways in which communicative acts are executed. This special attention to the form of the message is what Roman Jakobson (1960) called the "poetic function" of speech (see section 9.2). Performance is "something creative, realized, achieved" (Hymes 1981: 81). It is a dimension of human life that is most typically emphasized in music, theater, and other public displays of artistic abilities and creativity. It is for instance found in verbal debates, story tellings, singing, and other speech activities in which what speakers say is evaluated according to aesthetic canons, that is, for the beauty of

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[10] In Chomsky's more recent writings, the distinction between competence and performance is revived through the distinction between what he calls "internal language" (I-language) and "external language" (E-language) (Chomsky 1986) (see section 3.5.1).

[11] Chomsky's notion of competence was criticized by Dell Hymes (1972b) who introduced the alternative notion of **communicative competence**. This is the knowledge that a speaker needs to have in order to function as a member of a social group. Although Hymes's notion tries to solve some of the problems inherent in Chomsky's notion, it subscribes to the same epistemological assumptions. Some of these assumptions have been questioned by more recent theoretical perspectives such as practice theory and distributed cognition (see chapter 2).

their phrasing or delivery, or according to the effect it has on an audience, namely, for their ability to "move" the audience (Briggs 1988). But this notion of performance can also describe what is often found in the most ordinary of encounters, when social actors exhibit a particular attention to and skills in the delivery of a message. To subscribe to and focus on this other notion of performance is more than the recognition of the fact that in speaking there is always an aesthetic dimension, understood as an attention to the form of what is being said. It also means to stress the fact that speaking itself always implies an exposure to the judgment, reaction, and collaboration of an audience, which interprets, assesses, approves, sanctions, expands upon or minimizes what is being said (Duranti and Brenneis 1986). In this other meaning of performance, in addition to the dimension of accountability, there is also a dimension of risk or challenge (Bauman 1977). Even the most competent speaker can say the wrong word at the wrong time just like the best of actors can miscalculate a pause or an opera singer can fail to control the pitch of his voice. This dramatic dimension of verbal performance is recognized in a number of approaches in the social sciences, including Goffman's use of dramaturgic metaphors like *actor*, *stage*, *foreground/background*, *frame*, and Bourdieu's (1977) criticism of objectivist paradigms in anthropology that, in trying to spell out the "logic" of human action, miss the importance of the "unknown" – with its tension and uncertainty – during the different phases of an exchange (see section 2.1.5).

Performance in this sense is an ever-present dimension of language use because it is an ever-present dimension of language evaluation and there is no use without evaluation. We are constantly being evaluated by our listeners and by ourselves as our own listerners.

Finally, the notion of performance implies a notion of creativity (Palmer and Jankowiak 1996) and improvisation (Sawyer 1996). This is found across all kinds of speech activities and speech events, from the most ritualized and formal to the most ordinary and casual. In the NorthYemeni tradition studied by Steven Caton, the poet's skill in actual performance is not just to recite memorized verses, but to "situate the performance in its concrete setting by little details of reference and address" (Caton 1990: 106). This means that the poet must know how to connect traditional verses to the here-and-now. This is true in general of verbal performance. One of the attributes of a great orator in Samoan society is to know what to include and what to leave out of a speech while connecting well-known metaphors and proverbs to the occasion on which the speech is delivered, including the names and titles of the people present.

To be a fluent speaker of a language means to be able to enter any conversation in ways that are seen as appropriate and not disruptive. Such conversational skills, which we usually take for granted (until we find someone

who does not have them or ignore their social implications) are not too different from the ways in which a skilled jazz musician can enter someone else's composition, by embellishing it, playing around with its main motiv, emphasizing some elements of the melody over others, quoting other renditions of the same piece by other musicians, and trying out different harmonic connections – all of this done without losing track of what everyone else in the band is doing (Berliner 1994).

1.4.2   Indexicality

Philosophers have long recognized that there are different kinds of signs. Immanuel Kant, in his *Anthropology from a pragmatic point of view* ([1798] 1974), distinguished between **arbitrary** and **natural** signs. Letters representing linguistic sounds would be an example of arbitrary sounds. There is no necessary relationship between the shape of a particular letter and the quality of the sound or sounds it stands for, as shown by the fact that the same sound can be represented by different letters in the same alphabets or by different symbols in different orthographic traditions (e.g. Latin vs. cyrillic). A letter represents a sound and can evoke that sound in a reader because a convention has been established and accepted by a community. On the other hand, the smoke alerting us that there is fire is a sign that is not established by convention, but by the knowledge of a recurrent natural phenomenon. There is a relationship of contiguity between the sign (smoke) and the phenomenon it stands for (fire). Based on the belief that "if smoke, then fire," a person seeing smoke can infer that it might come from a nearby fire. The smoke does not "stand for" the fire the way in which the word *fire* might be used in telling a story about a past event. The actual smoke is connected, spatio-temporally and physically, to another, related, phenomenon and acquires "meaning" from that spatio-temporal, physical connection.[12] Starting from similar observations, the American philosopher Charles Peirce called the smoke an index and distinguished it from completely arbitrary signs (symbols) and signs that try to reproduce some aspect of their referent (icons) (see section 6.8). Indices (or **indexes**, as most scholars prefer today) are signs that have some kind of existential relation with what they refer to (Burks 1949). This category can be easily extended to linguistic expressions like the demonstrative pronouns *this*, *that*, *those*, personal pronouns like *I* and *you*, temporal expressions like *now*, *then*, *yesterday*, and spatial expressions like *up*, *down*, *below*, *above*. The property of these expressions has been called **indexicality** and has been shown to extend to much of linguistic communication.

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[12] The philosopher Paul Grice (1957/1971) called this kind of meaning "natural" and the meaning established by convention "unnatural." For Grice, unnatural meaning is characterized by intentionality (see section 7.3.2).

Language use is full of examples of linguistic expressions that are connected to or point in the direction of aspects of the sociocultural context.

> In a topological image, indexicality is by definition what I call a radial or polar-coordinate concept of semiotic relationship: indexical sign-vehicles point from an origin that is established in, by and "at" their occurring as the here-and-now "center" or tail, as it were, of a semiotic arrow. At the terminus of the radial path, or arrowpoint, is their indexical object, no matter what the perceptual and conceptual dimensions or properties of things indexed. Strictly by virtue of indexical semiosis, the "space" that surrounds the indexical sign-vehicle is unboundedly large (or small), characterizable in unboundedly many different ways, and its indexical establishment (as having-been-brought into being) almost limitlessly defeasible. (Silverstein 1992: 55)

Thus, an expression like *this table* includes an imaginary arrow[13] to something recognizable, most likely something perceptually available to both the speaker and the addressee. Such availability, however, needs not be immediate. For example, a word or expression can be used to index a past or future experience. Code switching is often used as an index of this sort. By uttering a word in another language, speakers might point to another time or place, where either they or their addressee have been or will be. In bilingual communities, where language switching is a daily affair, the choice of a particular language over another may index one's ethnicity or a particular political stance toward the relation between language and ethnicity. This is the case, for example, in Quebec, Canada (Heller 1982, 1995). In the following telephone conversation, for example, the use of French by a patient who is calling the appointments desk in a hospital is interpreted as an index of the patient's preference for French over English:

(1) CLERK: Central Booking, may I help you?
    PATIENT: Oui, allô?
    CLERK: Bureau de rendez-vous, est-ce que je peux vous aider?[14]
    (from Heller 1982: 112)

Because of its political implications, however, the offer of a choice between the two languages might be resisted, as it is the case in the following example:

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[13] Sometimes the "arrow" is not that imaginary given that the use of demonstratives like *this* are often accompanied by gestures.

[14] In a footnote, Heller points out that this expression, as common in language contact situations, appears to be a word-by-word translation of the English formula *may I help you?* rather than a corresponding French expression to achieve the same effect.

(2) Waiter: Anglais ou français, English or French?
2 Bilinguals: Bien, les deux ...
                         "Well, both ..."
Waiter: No, mais, anglais ou français?
                         "No, but, English or French?"
2 Bilinguals: It doesn't matter, c'est comme vous voulez.
                                 "whatever you want."
Waiter: (sigh) OK, OK, I'll be back in a minute.

                                          (from Heller 1982: 116)

These examples show that indexes range from apparently innocuous inquiries (can you speak French?) to political commitments (which side are you on?). For this reason, it is important to distinguish among different kinds or degrees of indexicality. For example, Silverstein (1976b) suggested that the index *this* simply presupposes the existence of an identifiable referent. The pronoun *you*, on the other hand, does something more than imply the existence of an addressee, it actually makes the social category of "addressee/recipient" happen or at least puts it on record. A person is not officially an addressee until he or she is addressed as *you* (whereas the table is already next to the speaker before he says "this"). Languages that have socially differentiated second-person pronouns (e.g. the classic T/V type of distinction of many European languages, French *tu/vous*, Spanish *tu/Usted*, German *du/Sie*, and Italian *tu/Voi* or *tu/Lei*) further exploit the indexical properties of personal pronouns by using them as pointers toward contextually relevant social coordinates of equality/inequality, solidarity/power (Brown and Gilman 1960). These are indexes that Silverstein (1976b) called "maximally creative or performative." The ways in which we define the world around us is part of the constitution of that world. It is this creative and performative aspect of indexicality that is used by speakers in the construction of ethnic and gender identities (Gumperz 1982a, 1982b; Hall and Bucholtz 1995). To say that words are indexically related to some "object" or aspect of the world out there means to recognize that words carry with them a power that goes beyond the description and identification of people, objects, properties, and events. It means to work at identifying how language becomes a tool through which our social and cultural world is constantly described, evaluated, and reproduced. According to Gumperz, this interactional work is performed through a vast range of **contextualization cues**, a subclass of indexical signs which let people know what is going on in any given situation and how interaction is expected to proceed (see section 6.8.2.2). Since contextualization cues are unequally distributed in any given population, indexicality is an important aspect of how power relations and power dynamics are played out in institutional encounters where a minority group is confronted with a new set of indexes: