Language and Social Relations

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CAMBRIDGE

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LANGUAGE AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

Language connects people to each other in social relationships and allows them to participate in a variety of activities in everyday life. This original study explores the role of language in various domains of our social life, including identity, gender, class, kinship, deference, status, hierarchy, and others. Drawing on materials from over thirty languages and societies, this book shows that language is not simply a tool of social conduct but the effective means by which human beings formulate models of conduct. Models of conduct serve as points of reference for social behavior, even when actual conduct departs from them. A principled understanding of the processes whereby such models are produced and transformed in large-scale social history, and also invoked, negotiated, and departed from in small-scale social interactions provides a foundation for the cross-cultural study of human conduct.

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LANGUAGE AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book is dedicated to my son Omar Sheheryar Agha, now 11, who helped me find examples of register phenomena in *Calvin and Hobbes* comic strips, and, when they were found, helped me find lots of other things too, so many that even Calvin and Hobbes had some trouble guessing what they were.

TYPOGRAPHICAL CONVENTIONS

I use **boldface**
For technical terms when first introduced and occasionally thereafter to remind the reader of their technical senses

'Single quotes'
1. For glosses of expressions and utterance-acts
2. For quotations from authors (except when numbered and set on a different line)
3. For everyday usages and terminologies on which I wish to comment

Italics
1. For forms of words and expressions in orthographic representation
2. For expository emphases

"Double quotes"
To clarify levels of embedding in reported speech

As for the linguistic data cited in this book, I have used IPA conventions whenever possible, but have left intact the conventions used by the many authors I cite when these depart from them.

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 precipi-tates 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 fraction-ally from Standard register, if a Standard exists, and only in some limited structural realm, such as lexicon or phonology; but this *fractional differ-ence* 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 dis-cussed 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 oper-ations 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 inter-action; blindfolds and earplugs readily dispose of this possibility even when co-presence is maintained.) Persons encounter each other by encoun-tering 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, imme-diacy, mutual awareness, and possible reciprocation. Each of us encounters countless others indirectly in mass media representations. Many encoun-ters 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, inter-mediation, 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 relent-lessly enough may one day help explain large scale issues that matter to all

of us. Some think that the true calling of social theory is to make macro-sociological generalizations, and that micro-analysts are wasting their time, or worse. Yet although these debates are often fierce they are not always clear about what the micro-/macro- divide is, or how it can be defined.

Part of the reason that the micro-/macro- divide is vexing is that it appears so natural, and yet so difficult to pin down. It seems natural because it appeals to a particular framework of part-whole reasoning that has long seemed plausible in twentieth century social theory, a framework where large scale phenomena are supposed to be composed of small scale phenomena and derive all of their causal structure from them. In yet other ways, the micro-/macro- distinction is an epistemological divide, one that separates different classes of social theory from each other through constraints placed by their underlying assumptions on what they can reveal about social processes. Yet the distinction is difficult to pin down because the prefixes *micro-* and *macro-* are correlative terms which cannot be defined on any absolute scale of largeness or smallness, only contextually and relationally, like *near* and *far*. Ad hoc definitions are always possible, of course. Many believe that face to face encounters are micro-phenomena and the emergence of nation states macro-phenomena. But these are merely differences of sociohistorical and demographic scale. Once we attend to matters of scale it is readily apparent that every macro-phenomenon is a micro-phenomenon with respect to a phenomenon at a larger scale. Differences of scale cannot by themselves constitute a divide.

Taking reflexive processes seriously means that the assumption that smaller scale phenomena causally shape larger scale phenomena, but not vice versa, also becomes implausible. In section 1.6 I argue that small scale reflexive activities have semiotic consequences that perdure beyond an encounter and become known to larger groups of people; in this respect a single encounter is an element of a larger process, and contributes to the shape of that process. You might say that this amounts to a part-whole argument, and in one sense it does. However a single semiotic encounter in my sense is not necessarily an event of micro-interaction. It may be. But, given the definition I just gave, it may also connect millions of people to each other, as in the case of a television broadcast or in other forms of mass communication. So there is a part-whole structure here but it does not correspond to the micro-/macro- relationship proposed in interactionist approaches to social theory. Nor does it involve a scheme of part-whole causal explanation. This is because a 'whole' is often a functional element of a 'part'.

To see this we have to see that semiotic encounters become occasions in which communication can occur only under certain conditions. Just 'being

there' doesn't make communication happen. Take a case of oral communication in which polite speech is being used. One kind of condition on politeness being conveyed by the utterance is that expressions that occur in the utterance need to have become valorized in a specific way through a larger social process as polite forms for at least some people (what is polite for one sub-group is often rude for others); another condition is that the particular individuals who happen to be there, who perceive these signs as audible speech, need to have gone through particular trajectories of socialization so as to belong to the relevant groups, that is, to have become individuals for whom these forms count as polite (or rude). These are two entirely different kinds of large scale processes. And both serve as conditions on the communicative possibilities available in the smaller scale encounter. In this sense, the 'macro-' level is part of the 'micro-' level. It is presupposed within the current encounter as a condition on there being communication at all.

At some points in this book I talk of small scale encounters shaping larger scale processes; at other points I describe large scale processes through which particular types of registers emerge and become usable in face to face encounters. Thus relationships across scales that differ as smaller-to-larger and larger-to-smaller both matter. And a social theory of language that recognizes these relationships and explores their consequences gets rid of the epistemological boundaries that separate social theories that do not.

When people invoke the micro-/macro- divide they are sometimes thinking of other things too. For instance, to many anthropologists, an account of how the deictics *I* and *you* work in English is clearly an account of a 'micro-' phenomenon. Why? Well *I* and *you* are just little words. How about an account of all English deictics? Oh, that's still just a few words; and it's only English. How about a framework for reasoning about deixis in all human languages? (Notice that such a framework, if accurate, would help us understand how more than six billion people anchor themselves hundreds of times every day with respect to their referential and interpersonal realities in acts of reference.) Still not 'macro-' enough? My impression is that it isn't. My impression is that for many anthropologists, 'macro-' things are things denoted by certain types of nouns. If I'm writing about 'modernity' or 'hierarchy' or 'globalization' that's clearly 'macro-'. Notice that these nouns are abstract nouns, not deictics; they bathe their referents in a numinous glow of vastness and mystery. (If I point out that modernity hasn't reached all six billion yet, it won't help.) Part of my argument in this book is that phenomena of these kinds, phenomena grouped under vast notional rubrics in this way cannot be studied empirically unless the forms of social-semiotic activity through which they are expressed, and the processes through which such activities become

valorized so as to be able to express them are clearly understood. These activities need not depend on the use of abstract nouns, or have abstract nouns as names. As long as they are organized as practices in which many people engage, they are large scale social practices in the relevant sense. Most such practices don't come with ready-made, naturally occurring, everyday names – abstract or otherwise – and for those that do, the everyday names with which we try to pry into them, or pry them open, mislead us. We can understand their social consequences only if we understand their semiotic organization. This argument is developed over the course of this book and culminates in the discussion in Chapter 8.

You might say that what we ordinarily call 'language' also constitutes a vast notional rubric. This is perfectly true. That is why a social analysis of language always encounters ideologies of language that co-exist with the phenomenon itself and which themselves require analysis (in both semiotic and ethnographic terms) in order for the social phenomenon of language to be understood. And that is why a lot of the work that I do in the pages that follow involves looking at ideologies of language.

We know that social relations can be expressed by all kinds of things – gifts, clothing, cars, handshakes, land mines. Why emphasize the role of language? If we regard social relations not merely from the vantage of those scattered moments – whether warm or explosive – in which they rise to focal awareness or to forms of civic summary by individual persons, but regard them instead as positions held or taken within cultural projects in which others also play a part, and if we take seriously the idea that the intelligibility and efficacy of social relations depends on the character of reflexive processes that connect persons to each other – and I claim that we must do this to study social relations of any kind, however expressed – then we can scarcely proceed without an understanding of a type of semiotic activity that gives reflexive processes their greatest complexity and elaboration for humans. This activity, the activity of using language, plays a central role in connecting social persons to each other at every scale of geographic and historical remove, in classifying and valorizing perceivable objects so that social relations can be expressed through them, and, since reflexive operations can be iterated, in formulating models of sociohistorical reality that diverge fractionally within the very order of interpersonal semiotic activity that gives rise to them, thereby linking social semiosis to forms of positional difference, contestation and politics. Understanding the various reflexive relationships expressible through language and the social processes to which these possibilities give rise is our first task, the main business of Chapter 1.

I

REFLEXIVITY

1.0 Introduction

In every human society certain uses of language make palpable highly specific kinds of social effects such as the indication of one's relationship to persons spoken to or spoken about, or the presentation of self as belonging to some identifiable social group, class, occupation or other category of personhood. In such cases particular features of utterance appear to formulate a sketch of the social occasion constituted by the act of speaking. Our sense that the people that we meet are persons of certain kinds, that they differ from us in status or group-affiliation, that they establish recognizable roles and relationships in their encounters with us are all social effects mediated by the utterances they produce. Unavoidably, such effects depend also on accompanying non-linguistic signs (such as gesture, clothing, features of setting) which comprise a context for construing the effects of speech. In general, therefore, the social effects mediated by speech are highly context-bound or **indexical** in character: they are evaluated in relation to the context or situation at hand, including those aspects of the situation created by what has already been said or done. Either an utterance is felt to be appropriate to the situation as already understood, or it alters the context in some recognizable way, transforming it into a situation of an entirely different kind. We may speak, in particular, of **social indexicality** when the contextual features indexed by speech and accompanying signs are understood as attributes of, or relationships between, social persons.

In this book I use the term **social relations** for this domain of enactable roles and relationships. The more encompassing term is useful because 'roles' and 'relationships' are correlative ways of talking about persons. To identify a person's role is potentially to infer relationships to others such as oneself. To identify a relationship is to recognize connections between persons, to view them in roles that vary as the relationship unfolds. Human languages have a variety of properties that delineate social relations in this sense. These clarify diverse aspects of our social being. They allow us to negotiate our dealings with others in particular encounters and

hence over many encounters; they allow us to establish identities recognized by others, to maintain these identities over time or to depart from them; they permit the treatment of diverse objects as valued goods or commodities through which describable social identities and relationships are expressed. The goal of this book is to discuss the ways in which language plays a part in these possibilities.

It will be evident that in order to do this we need to become clearer about the processes whereby images of role and relationship come to be associated with language in the first place. Yet our everyday terminology for talking about these issues is quite unsatisfactory. Most language users can recognize the social indexical effects of speech more easily than they can describe *how* they recognize them. If ideas about language are at issue, they are often unarticulated ideas. We might do better, perhaps, by speaking of habits of evaluation. But whether we speak of ideas or habits (or find, as we shall, that we can dispense with neither notion) it is clear that we are dealing with the social value of language for persons connected to each other through its use, as speakers or hearers of spoken utterances, as writers and readers of written ones, and so on.

Utterances are social in several senses. In a very basic sense, utterances are social because they are signs that function as connectors. They form a connection or a bridge between – they semiotically **mediate** relations between – persons who interact with each other through them. The connection is perceivable (audible as sound, legible as script); it has physical and durational characteristics which allow for differences in the propinquity, number and types of persons it connects (viz., oral vs. televised vs. printed speech); it may mediate social relations at a small or large sociohistorical scale; it is accompanied by non-linguistic signs, upon which its intelligibility often depends. But utterances are social in a second, more specific sense too, the sense to which I alluded in my opening paragraph. They formulate a sketch of the social occasion in which they occur; they make social relations construable as effects of their occurrence. Such effects are of more than one type and require different types of analysis.

In one type of case the effect is **stereotypically** associated with the semiotic display; many people are socialized so to recognize it. In such cases widespread schemes of speech valorization associate particular forms of speech with commonplace value distinctions (e.g., good vs. bad speech, upper-class vs. lower-class speech), which are known to a large number of speakers. The ability to recognize such effects depends on a prior history of socialization through which persons become acquainted with such culture-internal values; if you lack the requisite background you cannot recover the distinction. For such cases, the task for a social theory of language is two-fold: on the one hand to explain how the use of speech is interpreted in the light of such value systems; and, on the other, to explain how particular

systems of speech valorization come into existence in the first place and, once formed, exist as cultural phenomena over the course of some period for some locatable group of social persons.

But language use has a second kind of social effectiveness as well. In this type of case the social effects in question are mediated by **emergent** features of current semiotic activity. No socially widespread scheme of speech valorization underlies the construal. We shall see in Chapter 2 that even ordinary referential uses of language – cases where speech is used to pick out and characterize entities in the world – pervasively mediate interpersonal effects of this kind. In such cases social relations are mediated by an emergent organization of signs that co-occur in the current interaction; they are not mediated by the stereotypic values of any single sign. For example, when one person succeeds (or fails) in drawing another's attention to a referent, or characterizes a referent in a way that the other accepts (or rejects), or uses a referring expression that the other understands (or doesn't), the relative behavior of the two individuals constitutes a form of emergent alignment between them. A variety of such positions, stances, alliances and boundaries readily emerge around acts of referential communication in our everyday experience of language use, but most of them last only for a moment or two and give way to others, often following each other in rapid succession across phases of interaction. Others last longer, as we shall see, in ways that depend on the macro-social organization of interpersonal encounters. All such effects are highly palpable and consequential while an interaction is under way but the sign-configurations that mark them are less easily discussed out of context, particularly in the more evanescent cases. Nonetheless social effects of this kind do have a principled organization that a social theory of language must describe.

Whether we are dealing with stereotypic or emergent social effects, or with the way in which they are laminated together in some stretch of semiotic activity, our ability to describe such effects depends on **reflexive** uses of language. Such uses of language are reflexive in the sense that language is both a semiotic mechanism involved in the performance of these effects and in their construal. The purpose of this chapter is to characterize some of the more basic issues linked to the apparently simple observation that the social life of language, and of language users, is pervasively organized through and around reflexive activities.

1.1 Reflexive activity

Human beings routinely engage in forms of **reflexive activity**, namely activities in which communicative signs are used to typify other perceivable signs. Reflexive acts differ among themselves in a variety of ways, such as the kinds of signs through which they are expressed, the kinds of

phenomena they typify, the explicitness with which they do so, and the degree to which they constitute commonplace practices. In the sections below I show that we cannot understand the variety of social relations enactable in social life without coming to grips with the range of reflexive relationships expressible through speech. Let us take the special case of reflexive linguistic activity, or metalinguistic activity, as our point of departure.

Metalinguistic activity

To speak of **metalinguistic activity** is to speak of a vast range of meaningful behaviors that typify the attributes of language, its users, and the activities accomplished through its use. All attempts to understand the properties of language require the use of metalinguistic devices, of which the technical terminologies employed by linguists are a special case. A variety of metalinguistic activities occur naturally in social life as well, and are readily recognized as such. Metalinguistic routines such as requesting, formulating and interpreting word glosses are a commonplace of everyday experience; in the case of parent-child interaction such activities are necessary for the acquisition of vocabulary items by children. Yet the role of metalinguistic activity in shaping and propagating cultural regularities other than the lexicon is less obvious to our everyday intuitions.

The study of language as a social phenomenon must include the study of metalinguistic activity for a simple reason: language users employ language to categorize or classify aspects of language use, including forms of utterance, the situations in which they are used, and the persons who use them. Such reflexive classifications shape the construal of speech (and accompanying signs) for persons acquainted with them. Institutionalized metalinguistic practices play a distinctive role in expanding this circle of acquaintance, in making reflexive classifications more widely known. But before we turn to the analysis of such large scale social processes it is necessary to attend to the range and variety of reflexive activity itself. Let us begin with metalinguistic acts in the least restrictive sense of the term.

Any act which typifies some aspect of language is, by definition, a metalinguistic act. Notice that this broad and minimal definition commits us only to the object typified by the act, i.e., 'some aspect of language.' It tells us nothing about the form of the act itself. From this standpoint, metalinguistic acts necessarily typify aspects of language, though they need not themselves be linguistic utterances. An eyebrow raised in response to a remark implicitly evaluates the import of that remark and is, to this extent, a metalinguistic act. But it is not an instance of language use. In contrast, a response like 'You sound silly!' is both a metalinguistic evaluation and a

linguistic utterance. In both cases an act evaluates, or ascribes some value to, an utterance. But in the latter case the evaluative act is an utterance which explicitly describes the remark evaluated. In this example the evaluative description is an occasion-specific utterance. But acts of value ascription to language can also become standardized in form (i.e., the way they are expressed), acquire much more generic discursive objects (e.g., entire speech varieties), and become habitual for large groups of evaluators. I return to the question of how this happens in 1.6 and the chapters that follow.

Linguists and ethnographers become privy to acts of value ascription to language under conditions of fieldwork where metalinguistic behaviors of various kinds occur naturally as part of the everyday fabric of social life. Other types of metalinguistic activity result from interventions by the analyst, such as the asking of explicit, pointed questions. Frequently, boundaries between academic subfields and disciplinary traditions correspond to decisions about the type of metalinguistic activity to be treated as data. For instance, in generative grammar, most types of naturally occurring metalinguistic activity are officially considered peripheral or secondary as sources of data; but a highly specific genre of metalinguistic data – called 'grammaticality judgments' – is dialogically elicited from native speakers by the linguist and forms the basis of grammatical analysis.[1] In conversation analysis, selected patterns of interactionally linked discourse are treated as a privileged metalinguistic resource. For example, utterances occurring in a 'next' interactional turn are treated as providing information *about* language used in a prior turn, and hence as a type of implicit metalinguistic data.[2] Similarly, ethnographers have long appealed to metalinguistic words and expressions as evidence for native categories of speech, thought and action. But this too is a special case. The use of metalinguistic words and expressions is but a tiny fragment of the range of native metalinguistic practices which the ethnographer observes during fieldwork or employs in formulating hypotheses about culture.[3] What is distinctive about words and expressions is that their metalinguistic uses constitute the most transparent type of metalinguistic data, hence most easily reproduced in overt form in ethnographic reports.

In the next few sections we shall see that although particular traditions may well privilege some metalinguistic practices over others, actual linguistic or ethnographic research employs a much wider range of metalinguistic data than is usually discussed in statements on method. This tendency is even more acute in our everyday discursive practices. For, as Roman Jakobson observed, the tendency to underdifferentiate metalinguistic features of discourse is vastly more prominent in the case of the ordinary language user: 'Like Molière's Jourdain who used prose without knowing it, we practice metalanguage without realizing the metalingual character of our operations.' (Jakobson 1960: 356). Why should this be so?

Some characteristics of metalinguistic activity

Although language users routinely engage in metalinguistic activity, such activity is not systematically differentiated from other types of linguistic activity in everyday awareness (Silverstein 1976, Lucy 1993). There are at least three basic reasons why this is so.

First, metalinguistic uses of language are not always formally differentiable from other types of uses. Although every language contains naturally occurring metalinguistic devices, all such devices have other uses as well. For example, the constructions 'X is Y' and 'X means Y' may be used to form metalinguistic equations, as in (1a); yet both constructions are commonly put to non-metalinguistic uses as well, as in (1b).

(1) The constructions 'X is Y' and 'X means Y'
  (a) *metalinguistic uses*:
      A triangle is a geometric figure with three sides.
      Antediluvian means before the flood.
  (b) *other uses*:
      A triangle is the last thing on his mind right now.
      Sunday means spaghetti again.

The two kinds of uses are not always formally distinguished from each other by a simple segmentable mark occurring in the construction itself. Indeed the features of form that differentiate metalinguistic statements from other types are sufficiently varied (rather than unitary) and pattern-dependent (rather than localizable) that the two kinds of cases are not easily distinguished as discrete constructional classes without further grammatical analysis.[4] Hence all tokens of the first kind are not invariably differentiated from other usages in everyday metalinguistic reflection.

Second, metalinguistic activity ranges over several functional modes, i.e., may clarify different aspects of language structure or use. The statements in (1a) are statements about the semantic properties of lexemes and, hence, function as **metasemantic** statements. In these cases the metasemantic statement typifies the semantics of one expression (X) by employing another (Y) as its gloss. In contrast, the examples in (2) do not typify the semantic properties of linguistic expressions. They describe events of language use.

(2) (a) 'Let me go!' she { commanded / pleaded / said … }
   (b) He ordered a beer.
   (c) She insulted me.
   (d) He teased her again.

Insofar as these statements characterize the pragmatic act performed in the events reported they constitute **metapragmatic** descriptions of these events (Silverstein 1993). The descriptions in (2) are of a cross-linguistically common variety. They employ a class of metapragmatic descriptors

found in all human languages called *verba dicendi* or 'verbs of speaking' (i.e., *command, plead, say, order, tease, insult*, etc.) which are commonly used to describe acts of speaking. Notice that the choice of verb selectively imputes a particular social contour to the speech event depicted in each case, typifying it as a social act of some kind, viz., a command, a plea, an insult, and so on, even though these statements give us very little detail on how the rest of the interaction actually transpired.

This brings us to a third characteristic of metalinguistic activity, namely that such activity differs in the degree of explicitness with which it typifies its object of description. Whereas all the metapragmatic statements in (2) describe pragmatic speech events, they differ in the degree to which they delineate or make explicit the details of the events described. From the standpoint of roles and identities, all four examples clarify the gender of the narrated speaker but only (2c) and (2d) explicitly denote a narrated addressee, and only (2d) specifies the gender of the person in this role. From the point of view of social relationships, all four descriptions formulate a sketch or snapshot of relationships unfolding in the interactions described (viz., an act of *ordering* someone, *teasing* someone, *insulting* someone, etc.) even though, in these examples, the sketch is not very detailed nor very revealing of the way in which such relations were negotiated over the course of these interactions. We cannot expect too much of descriptions that are one sentence long. But using the referential machinery of language it is possible to formulate accounts of any degree of precision desired. Conversely, and perhaps more interestingly, it is possible to typify pragmatic phenomena without describing them in explicit terms (see Figure 1.4ff). The important point for the moment is that relatively non-detailed – even fragmentary – typifications orient us to the pragmatic phenomena they model, but do so without calling much attention to their own character as reflexive acts.

All three characteristics discussed above contribute in various ways to making us into everyday practitioners of a type of activity that calls little attention to itself, despite its ubiquity. These characteristics may be summarized as follows:

Summary 1.1
Metalinguistic uses of language

(a) are not always differentiable from other uses by simple criteria of surface form
(b) are not functionally unitary, but range over several modes, including
   - uses which typify the semantic properties of expressions (metasemantic uses)
   - uses which typify features of pragmatic acts of usage (metapragmatic uses)

(c) differ in the explicitness with which they characterize or differentiate the phenomena they typify

The foregoing issues have some very general implications for social scientific research as well. Many of the things that we group under overlarge rubrics – like 'social structure,' 'culture,' 'norms,' 'power' and the like – are, as I propose to show, products or precipitates of forms of reflexive activity mediated by language. But showing that this is so requires some clarity about the nature of smaller scale reflexive activities (their characteristics, variety, and interplay) and such features of them as give rise to more perduring and widely known reflexive formations, or help maintain them over the course of some period, or bring about their transformation and change. Since larger scale formations live through smaller scale activities it is with the latter that we must begin, and, for obvious reasons, proceed one step at a time.[5]

I want to begin moving in this direction by illustrating some implications of the issue summarized in S 1.1(c). One implication is that linguistic usages that typify utterances may concurrently typify other objects of description – such as accompanying non-linguistic signs, and even qualities of persons – whether explicitly or implicitly, whether occasionally or routinely, and thus formulate analogies or likenesses among apparently disparate aspects of human affairs.

Metasemiotic activity in general

We noted above that metapragmatic verbs like *command, plead, say, tease, insult*, etc., are traditionally called *verba dicendi* or verbs of speaking because they are commonly used to describe acts of speaking and their effects. However it follows from S 1.1(c) that all such uses do not differentiate, equally explicitly, the types of signs contributing to the total effect described. In any discursive act appropriately described by such verbs the use of speech may well be intermingled with the use of other semiotic devices such as winks, nods, or other gestures; indeed, the description may accurately capture overall effects without distinguishing the signs that contribute to them. For example, the metapragmatic statement 'He insulted me' is commonly used to describe effects of utterances, of utterances accompanied by gestures, and even of scatological gestures unaccompanied by speech.

This issue may be summarized as follows.

Summary 1.2
In everyday usage, metapragmatic terms that are used to formulate specifically metalinguistic accounts may also be used to formulate more broadly metasemiotic accounts.

The point holds quite generally, not just for verbs, as in the examples in (2), but for metapragmatic uses of nouns and adjectives too. Thus when we look across cultures we find that terms such as *politeness*, *refinement* or *respectability* are commonly used to describe specific uses of language; but the same terms are used to describe non-linguistics activities as well, such as bowing, putting palms together, dressing appropriately and so on. For example, in Thai, the term *mâi suphâap* 'impolite' is predicable of utterances and kinesic activity but also of physical objects: 'casual sandals and revealing or immodest women's clothes ... are called *mâi suphâap* 'impolite' and symbolize a lack of concern and respect for authority' (Simpson 1997: 42). Here diverse objects – specific forms of utterance, gesture clothing, footwear, etc. – which can themselves be displayed as signs in behavior are grouped together under a metasemiotic typification. They comprise the **semiotic range** of the typification. The typification is a **metasign**, a sign typifying others, which motivates a likeness among objects within its semiotic range (Figure 1.1). Diverse objects are now signs of a particular type of conduct. They are **object-signs** with respect to the metasign that groups them together as signs of the same type of conduct.
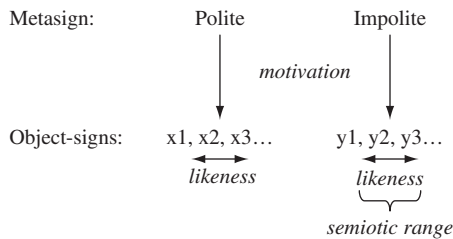
Figure 1.1   *Metasemiotic motivation of icons*

Metasemiotic typifications of this kind motivate a type of **cross-modal iconism** whereby forms of speech (y1) are likened to object-signs of other kinds (y2, y3, etc.), such as paralanguage, gesture, body comportment or artifactual accompaniment. Many kinds of metasemiotic activity can achieve this effect, as we shall see; the Thai case here, involving a regularity of predication, is just the simplest kind of example.[6]

The fact that language may be used as a metasemiotic notation for both linguistic and non-linguistic signs has the consequence that for many social phenomena (such as 'politeness' or 'power' and so on) reflexive activity blurs the boundaries between language and non-language at the level of object-signs, i.e., behavioral displays. Many kinds of behavior become motivated as signs of 'politeness' and the like, each capable of indexing a

comparable social fact for those acquainted with the scheme of metasemiotic typification.

In many cases, a range of objects thus grouped into a likeness can co-occur with each other as signs in social interaction. The fact that sign repertoires in different semiotic channels receive a unified (or at least overlapping) metasemiotic treatment often has the consequence that acts of using certain kinds of socially valued speech appear most felicitous and appropriate when the speech variety co-occurs with certain *non-linguistic* displays; in such cases, the occurrence – display, enactment – of certain non-linguistic signs may even be treated, culture-internally, as a prerequisite on the appropriate use of corresponding linguistic signs, and vice-versa. We are observing, in other words, that:

Summary 1.3
Overlaps in the metasemiotic treatment of otherwise disparate signs provide criteria on the appropriate co-occurrence of such signs.

One common type of situation where this occurs is the case where normative traditions of etiquette specify restrictions on the behavioral display of signs in many channels. The following example from Javanese is a sample of metasemiotic discourse that describes canons of semiotic display among the *Priyayi*, the traditional Javanese aristocracy:

(3)   A complicated etiquette dictates the way a person sits, stands, directs his eyes, holds his hands, points, greets people, laughs, walks, dresses, and so on. There is a close association between the rigor with which the etiquette of movement is observed and the degree of refinement in speech. The more polite a person's language, the more elaborate are his other behavioral patterns; the more informal his speech, the more relaxed and simplified his gestures.

(Poedjosoedarmo 1968:54)

This example is more elaborate than the previous Thai case in a variety of ways and I shall have more to say about it later (1.6). One thing is similar however. A unifying form of metasemiotic treatment (here, a normative code of etiquette) imbues diverse object-signs (the manner of sitting, standing, gaze, laughter, dress, speech, and so on) with comparable values (the capacity to index refinement in performance). Among the issues that require further discussion are the nature of the processes whereby such icons become semiotically elaborated (i.e., acquire a more diverse semiotic range), become widely known (acquire, as I shall say, a larger social domain), or are treated as authoritative by some among those acquainted with them.[7]

The important point for the moment is that once interactants have criteria on the comparability of signs, the actual sequential deployment or performance of such signs itself carries information. Let us consider this point in more detail.

1.2 Text-level indexicality and interactional tropes

Metasemiotic schemes of the above kind permit various types of manipulation in the order of interaction itself. The very fact that a scheme of typification can motivate likenesses among otherwise disparate signs (i.e., can treat all the x's in Figure 1.1 as 'polite' and all the y's as 'impolite') has the consequence that, relative to the scheme of motivation, *the comparability of co-occurring signs* in the temporal flow of behavior itself carries information. In simple terms: any observer acquainted with the scheme can evaluate an order of co-occurring signs – which may include signs in many channels, and thus comprise **a multi-channel text** – for internal likeness and unlikeness of effect among its partials. The top line in Figure 1.2 illustrates the case where all the signs displayed in behavior are judged to have the same indexical values. Here the order of text is **indexically congruent**. The lower line illustrates the non-congruent case.

Evaluations of textual congruence or non-congruence take as their object of evaluation an order of co-occurring signs made sensible or perceivable through timebound activity. To speak of co-occurring signs as an order of **text** is to observe that they have a unifying **texture** i.e., fit together in some way. This is another way of saying that a larger whole is evaluable for the congruence of its parts. The criteria of likeness or 'fit' may be quite various.[8] But when such criteria are indeed available, a textual order contains, or conveys, indexical information that is not reducible to the indexical values of any of its parts. To speak of **text-level indexicality** in this sense is to speak of a wholly emergent type of information that reflexively shapes the construal of behavior while the behavior is still under way.

Such text-level indexical effects are completely **non-detachable** for purposes of construal: They are not preserved under decontextualization. If you isolate a piece from the total textual process that motivates the effect, the semiotic partial thus 'detached' appears to have no property that could explain the text-level effect, no matter how carefully you inspect it! The effect depends on the comparability of co-occurring signs – by criteria of congruence/non-congruence – and therefore vanishes when the sign is isolated and inspected by itself. In matters of etiquette the non-congruent case in Figure 1.2 is best exemplified by the phenomenon of the 'fatal breach': imperfect mastery of a code of etiquette often allows a person to

Congruent: …… x1 …… x2 …… x3   ————————▶
                                            time
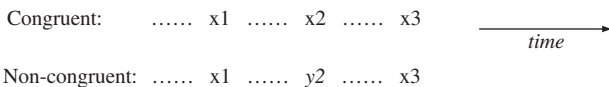
Non-congruent: …… x1 …… y2 …… x3

Figure 1.2   *Metasemiotically motivated co-occurrence effects: text-level indexicality*

observe many of its niceties in performance, to display the self as refined in many ways, until such moment as a single mis-step (y2 in the figure) indexes that imperfect mastery, relegating the person to a less authentic status (a social climber, parvenu) in the judgment of others.

Any approach to interaction that does not attend to text-level index-icality remains incomplete in the sense that it fails to capture a large part of what it seeks to explain. For during social interaction, attention to text-level indexicality allows participants to formulate **emergent reflexive models** of what is happening, who their interactants are, what they're doing, what they intend by their doings, what they actually achieve, and so on, over an interval of semiotically mediated interaction; such a textually diagrammed model of interaction, or **interactional text** (Silverstein 1993), is shaped by inferences from many co-textual cues and therefore differs significantly from the effects of any particular one. Indeed, cases where textually diagrammed models of interaction are inconsistent with the effects of localizable signs are sometimes puzzling or confusing to those at the receiving end of the message, and such puzzlement or uncertainty can be exploited by the sender of the message as a way of controlling or dominating interlocutor.

A particularly dramatic instance of this occurs in the case of interactional tropes of veiled aggression such as irony and sarcasm. The example below is from Paul Friedrich's classic study of pronominal usage in Russian. After giving a systematic account of norms of usage associated with the Russian pronouns *vy* (polite) and *ty* (non-polite) Friedrich observes that such norms are often manipulated in encounters to yield complex interactional tropes, such as the one recalled below by Tolstoy from an encounter between an old countess and a young prince:

(4) This and other cases in my data point to important discriminations not covered by my system: those of sarcasm and irony. Under certain circumstances the opposite of the expected usage could confuse, humiliate, or affront an addressee . . . This is illustrated by a passage from the twentieth chapter of Tolstoy's *Childhood*.

> Grandmother had a singular gift of expressing her opinion about people under certain circumstances by using the plural and singular pronouns of the second person together with a certain tone of voice. She used *vy* and *ty* contrary to general custom, and on her lips these shades of meaning acquired an entirely different significance. When a young prince walked up to her she said a few words calling him *vy* and looked at him with an expression of such contempt that if I had been in his place I would have become utterly confused . . .

(An ancient countess would normally use *ty* to a young prince.)

(Friedrich 1986: 280)

It is readily seen that the overall effect in question is a laminated interactional trope, the result of two distinct tropes – one performed through a

linguistic sign, the other through a kinesic act – that are superimposed upon one another.

The first of these is the trope of hyperpoliteness achieved by 'the opposite of the expected [pronominal] usage': Since the countess and the prince do not differ in class (both are aristocrats), the salient status asymmetry between them is one of age; the prince is younger and would normatively expect his older interlocutor to use the non-polite pronoun *ty* in addressing him. By using *vy* the countess is troping upon this norm (performing a usage that is not congruent with co-textually motivated expectations) in the direction of excessive politeness. The second trope is motivated by kinesic accompaniment: the expression of 'contempt' is utterly non-congruent with the excessive politeness performed through the linguistic trope. These two performed signs – the pronoun *vy* and the facial expression – index models of social relations that are mutually inconsistent. Together they constitute the trope of veiled aggression: the contemptuous glance implements a form of aggression, the pronominal politeness counts as its veiling. Tolstoy remarks that in this scenario he would have become 'utterly confused.' Creating such confusion among interlocutors is a characteristic feature of strategies of veiled aggression cross-culturally (Agha 1997). Any act that successfully implements more than one model of its own significance creates a tension in the interlocutor, curtailing the avenues of unambiguous response available in the next turn.

Such text-level effects differ from item-level effects in that they can only be 'calculated' or reckoned by appeal to a sign-configuration – a semiotic array or text involving two or more co-occurring signs – that emerges or unfolds during the course of interaction. Now, it may seem that to speak of co-occurring signs in this way is potentially to open up a vast can of worms. Many signs of diverse kinds typically co-occur with utterances in interaction. Which of these are relevant?

Even when the values of co-occurring signs are non-congruent – so that one marks rudeness, the other excessive politeness – the text-level construal **converges** when such co-occurring signs have the same **indexical focus**, that is, convey information *about the same interactant*; and, independently of the first issue, converges in a second way when the effects in question are understood as having the same **indexical origo**, that is, are understood as *performed by the same interactant* (see 1.4 for a more inclusive definition of origo and focus, of which these are special cases). Thus in the above example, the two sign-elements – facial expression and pronominal usage – are non-congruent in social import (one is rude, the other polite) but convergent in both indexical origo and focus. The countess is the origo or source of both effects since she is the one who performs the gaze and utterance. And the prince is the focus of these semiotic acts since the countess' act of 'calling him *vy*' establishes the prince as the referent/addressee of the

second person pronoun, and the directionality of the countess' gaze (when she 'looked at him with an expression of . . . contempt') establishes him as the focus of her kinesic disapprobation.

In general therefore when we speak of text-level indexicality we are concerned not only with mere facts of co-occurrence (in some physical sense), not only with the congruence of sign-values (relative, say, to a cultural scheme) but also with the convergence of indexical origo and focus of utterance-acts (within the emergent order of interaction). The example discussed above involves a very simple type of case. In later discussion we will see that the overall patternment of origo and focus may be more complex, and in a variety of ways. For example, different semiotic fractions of an utterance-act may be non-congruent in origo/focus, thus yielding more complex figures of action, such as voicing effects, ventriloquation, hybrid personae, and so on. In the case of elaborate honorific registers, a single utterance may concurrently mark the speaker/actor's relations with multiple interactants, who are all established as distinct foci of indexical deference by segmentable pieces of the utterance. Conversely, in a multi-party interaction, a single individual may become the focus of multiple utterance-acts having the same sign-value (e.g., all acts of disapprobation) even though the origos of these acts may be different individuals (e.g., cases where multiple interlocutors 'gang up' against a single individual) yielding various emergent groupings and alignments in interaction.

This section is intended as an initial orientation to the importance of text-level indexicality. The key point here is that *the co-textual organization of signs* can, as a whole, formulate effects which differ from any effects associated with *text-segments* that occur as its parts. In the case of **interactional tropes** one segment is non-congruent with another, and this effect is interpersonally significant. The relevance of criteria such as convergence of origo/focus to the above examples should also be clear. Other issues pertaining to this type of analysis are introduced later.

1.3 Reflexive activity in interaction

The preceding discussion makes clear that we cannot study the way in which social relations are established in interaction without careful attention to who produces a sign, to whom it is directed, what feature of context it clarifies, and so on. I have also suggested that we can make little sense of overall, cumulative effects in interaction without a careful analysis of (1) the semiotic partials that contribute component effects, and (2) the way in which these components are 'resolved' or unified (to the extent that they are) by the emergent orderliness of co-occurring signs, or text, which induces a higher-level patternment, evaluable by criteria such as congruence of indexical sign-value and convergence of the sign's origo or focus.