

CHAPTER
5
Language and Culture¹

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5.1 Introduction: 'Language' and 'Culture'

Language and culture are resources for carrying out the business of social relations. They are systems for interpreting and regulating social action within the complex, relationship-grounded style of group living that is characteristic of *homo sapiens* (Hinde, 1976; Sacks, 1992). These systems are built upon multiple foundations, of which three matter most: social intelligence of a uniquely human kind; a special, relationship-grounded brand of social group organization; and a historically cumulative frame of community-grounded conventions (Enfield and Levinson, 2006). Both language and culture are embedded in this infrastructure. They both inhibit and promote the kinds of social goals we may have, and the means we have for achieving them. Together, language and culture yield a framework through which individuals pursue social goals, enacting, incrementing and otherwise inhabiting positions in a vast network of social statuses (Linton, 1936; Kockelman, 2006b).

Attempts to define the words *language* and *culture* have been shaped by, or have shaped, intellectual fashions of the times (Duranti, 1997; Foley, 1997; Kuper, 1999; Layton, 1997).² There are two reasons why scholarly traditions may differ in their view of what language or culture are. These differences may be substantive, due to contrasting empirical and analytic bases. Or the differences may merely be rooted in contrasting sociological and ideological positions. A strong stance on the proper approach to language or culture may often imply, if not explicitly claim, that other approaches are irrelevant or wrong. For instance, in linguistics, some brands of 'functionalism' might imply that highly formalized accounts of grammar, or even just accounts of grammar which make explicit reference to cognitive representations, do not represent psychological reality (Hopper, 1987; cf. Goldberg, 2006). Or a strong 'formalist' position might argue that patterns of language **usage** have nothing to do with grammar at all (cf. Newmeyer, 2003). Or in anthropology, a strong 'practice' position may imply or claim that culture cannot be captured in terms of psychological representations, and so on. But language and culture are both so multi-faceted that a proper account will have to be heterogeneous: both psychological and practical, both private and public, both formal and functional.

5.2 Language and Culture as Cognitive Processes

The semiotic processes in which language and culture are observable necessarily involve a dynamic interface between the private domain of cognition and the public domains of perception and action. Knowledge, thought and moral value are indeed private but they are not **only** private. They also necessarily have a public face. They partake in processes which are caused by, and give rise to, public phenomena such as speech acts and other kinds of perceptible behaviour. Conversely, signs, artefacts and social practices are public, but they also have a private side, since they partake in processes which are caused by, and give rise to, perceptions, memories, beliefs, intentions and plans (Kockelman, 2006a). The things I know and think are brought about by what I have seen and heard. And the things I say and do are caused by things I know and think. Progress towards a full understanding of language and culture will mean abandoning the tendency to dichotomize, to assume that if one way of looking at the problem is certainly correct, then other views are mistaken. This just isn't the case.

Both language and culture are cognitive phenomena, which means that they are grounded in a capacity for flexibly solving means-ends problems, and a capacity for using mental representations displaced from an immediate context. This is captured in the definition of cognition offered by Tomasello and Call (1997: 8):

The prototype of a cognitive adaptation is a behavioral adaptation in which perceptual and behavioral processes (1) are organized flexibly, with the individual organism making decisions among possible courses of action based on an assessment of the current situation in relation to its current goal; and (2) involve some kind of mental representation that goes 'beyond the information given' to direct perception. Complexity in the decisions to be made is also characteristic of the prototype of a cognitive adaptation.

Of these two definitive components of cognition, the latter, mental representation, has been dominant in research on language. The classic Saussurean sign – signifier standing for signified – embodies this. A vast amount of linguistic research has aimed at characterizing the content of linguistic representations, an objective particularly explicit in technical approaches to semantic analysis. Characteristic of the reflexive nature of language and related types of system, these approaches explicate the content of linguistic representations with the aid of linguistic and diagrammatic devices. Paraphrase or definitional approaches may use different metalanguages and posit different primitives (cf. Wierzbicka, 1980 versus Jackendoff, 1983), but the basic *modus operandi* is the same: Linguistic representations are analysed in linguistic or quasi-linguistic terms. More recent developments in the analysis of meaning in language also invoke non-linguistic imagery in the explication of linguistic representations (e.g., Lakoff, 1987; Langacker, 1987).

5.3 Social Cognition and Relationship Thinking

To say that language and culture are cognitive phenomena is not to constrain them to what is in the head. Like other psychological processes, they are distributed. They hook into public artefactual material such as symbolic structures (writing, charts, tables, etc.) and material objects (tools, instruments, environmental structures; Norman, 1991; C. Goodwin, 1994, 2006; Hutchins, 1995, 2006; Enfield, 2009, *inter alia.*). Both language and culture are externally embodied, in symbols, in behaviour and in material culture. Classical topics in anthropology have this kind of distributed nature: think of kinship (in ritual events, in reproduction, in daily social behaviour, in language), biological taxonomy (in the physical world, in livelihood activities, in language), political organization (in social behaviour, in spatial arrangements, in language).

Beyond the mere fact of our cognitive processes being distributed (in the sense of Hutchins, 2006), the dimension of human cognition which matters crucially for the very possibility of culture and language even existing is not shared with any other species in quite the same form. This has recently been referred to as shared intentionality (Tomasello et al., 2005), a type of social cognition, grounded in a special awareness of, and attention to, human relationships, at several levels of granularity. Accordingly, a proper analysis of both language and culture requires **relationship thinking** (Hinde, 1976, 1997; Ingold, 1990). By this I mean both a kind of thinking that analysts should apply when trying to understand human interaction, and a kind of cognition that fosters human interaction and its most prominent machinery, i.e., the words and grammar of language, the practices and artefacts of culture. I agree with Ingold (1990) on the idea of culture as a 'logic of relationships' (225). This is in line with the views of biologists such as Dunbar (1988: 2) and Hinde (1976, 1982, 1991), and early comparative anthropologists like Linton (1936).³

At the core of our social world is the maintenance of relationships entailed by living in a special kind of social system (Linton, 1936: 113; de Waal and Tyack, 2003; see below). As Linton (1936) outlined, social statuses are 'polar' in that they define relations between people. These relationships are not simply dyadic. What is special about how humans and other higher primates deal with relationships is that we are capable of cognitively representing not just the dyadic relationships that we enter into with others, but the dyadic relationships **between others**, and further, in second-order terms, how those relationships between others stand with reference to **our own** relationships with those others. Once we recognize the capacity to represent not just relationships but **relations between** relationships (how one relationship is related to another relationship, and what that tells us), we derive powerful modes of thinking about meaning, and therefore, about language and culture (Kockelman, 2005).

A relationship thinking approach takes communicative interactions as a key locus (Hinde, 1976; Dunbar, 1988: 12 and *passim*). Each interaction enacts a specific, **token** relationship (e.g. between me and my brother Matt) as well as a **type** of

relationship (e.g. between a man and his brother). Types of relationship in turn define types of social statuses and identities which will be defining elements of higher-level social structure (Linton, 1936: 113–131, Radcliffe-Brown, 1952; Lévi-Strauss, 1953; Nadel, 1957; Hinde, 1976; Sacks, 1992; Dunbar and Spoor, 1995; Hill and Dunbar, 2003; Pomerantz and Mandelbaum, 2005; Enfield and Levinson, 2006).

5.4 Relationships and Social Structure

Higher-level or second-order social structure emerges out of the interplay of both negatively and positively valenced forces of relationship-grounded social behaviour. On the one hand, there are positive pro-social instincts that license trust, compassion and common identity (Henrich et al., 2004; Boyd and Richerson, 2006). On the other hand are the Machiavellian instincts that license competition, deception, and social distinction (Byrne and Whiten, 1988; Whiten and Byrne, 1997). In social interaction, humans are not only interested in (ritually or otherwise) reducing damage and promoting bonding (Huxley, 1966: 258), but are often equally interested in marking boundaries and establishing social difference (M. H. Goodwin, 1990: 141–225, 2006; cf. Goffman, 1959, 1967). However, these ostensibly contrastive forces are not always easily distinguished: in one frame, an act of altruism (e.g., spending time and money helping a stranger) can be seen in another frame as selfish (depriving those closer to you of valuable resources). How it looks depends on which social unit of analysis we take – the individual? the dyad? the triad? the family? the ethnic group? Each would be relevant in different contexts.

The idea of relationship thinking is for the analyst to regard human social relationships as a key locus of analysis of language and culture. While at higher levels of abstraction, linguistic and social structure can vary enormously across cultures, the fundamental site at which we observe the development and maintenance of such structure is in the co-present interactions by which (types of) relationships are concretely enacted (Hinde, 1976; Dunbar, 1988), and in the special cognition by which we are able to represent and process these relationships and the **relations between** them (Byrne and Whiten, 1988; Kockelman, 2005). The (types of) relationships enacted in interaction co-define the roles and identities that will ultimately define the sociology and ethnography of a community.

The relevant relationship types may be of two broad varieties, called externally grounded and reciprocally grounded. (These are not mutually exclusive.) If A and B stand in an externally grounded relationship, then their relationship is defined by how they each stand towards some common reference point (with associated definitive commitments and entitlements). For instance, if A and B are both members of a local cricket club, this is a potential basis for defining a relationship between them through external grounding. Such relations may be negatively defined as well, where A and B stand **differently** towards a common reference point. This type of relationship is also referred to as segmentary (Evans-Pritchard, 1940). Note that in an externally grounded relationship, the relationship between A and B is not a necessary consequence of their each standing in that way to the

external ground. By contrast, if A and B stand in a reciprocally grounded relationship, then the rights and responsibilities associated with A and B's incumbency in that relationship are mutually defined: e.g., if A is B's father, B is necessarily A's child.

Humans are among many species whose behaviour is organized around what de Waal and Tyack (2003) call individualized, longitudinal society. By describing human society as 'individualized', they mean that 'members recognize each other individually and form variable relationships built on histories of interaction' (de Waal and Tyack, 2003: x). Importantly, this is independent of any notion of individualism as a cultural value or ideology. What is common to all cultures is that society is made up of distinct, mobile, mortals, who are not telepathic, and whose interactions must therefore be managed by semiotic means. That is, manipulation of others in the social world involves the use of signs as tools to cause others' minds and bodies to be affected in relatively predictable ways, to relatively predictable ends. Local ideologies of the relation between person and society are distinct from this general fact, yet may be constrained by it.

The second property of socially complex societies which De Waal and Tyack pick out is that they are 'longitudinal' (or 'longitudinally stable'). In a longitudinal society, 'species with long life spans have long-term or multigenerational relationships, such as those between grandparents and grand-offspring or friendships among adults going back to youth' (de Waal and Tyack, 2003: x; cf. Dunbar, 1988).

I adopt the perspective proposed by de Waal and Tyack, but I use the term relationship-grounded instead of individualized, to more accurately capture the idea (cf. Hinde, 1976). Life in a relationship-grounded society presents each individual member with a common set of problems of social life. At some level and to some degree, many of these social problems (and possibly their best solutions) may be shared with creatures of other relationship-grounded societies such as those of elephants, bottlenose dolphins, spotted hyenas, baboons and capuchin monkeys (Dunbar, 1988; de Waal and Tyack, 2003; Sussman and Chapman, 2004).⁴ Of course, we humans have our own species-unique problems and solutions, but we are still part of the biological world and this should never be forgotten (Hinde, 1982, 1991; Boesch, 2007, *inter alia*).

5.5 Social Intelligence

Participants in any interaction are in a culturally and historically specific context, and in a particular kind of social world, as defined, in part, by species-specific determinants such as pro-social instincts, social intelligence capacities and structural constraints on social group size and relationship intensity (cf. Whiten and Byrne, 1997; Hill and Dunbar, 2003; Richerson and Boyd, 2005). But individual participants are at the same time mobile agents in distributed populations, each with their own properties as individuals, each with their own bodies and minds. Complex social life demands (and enables) complex social cognition (Jolly, 1966; Humphrey, 1976; Byrne and Whiten, 1988; Tomasello, 1999; de Waal and Tyack,

2003; Carpendale and Lewis, 2006, *inter alia*). People are equipped with a rich suite of cognitive capacities for navigating the social world, which for convenience may be referred to as social intelligence. This is not a single capacity or faculty, but a cluster of related abilities. Consider some of the cognitive capacities that different research traditions have focused on, suggesting the kind of social intelligence that any model of language and culture must presuppose (Carruthers and Smith, 1996; Carpendale and Lewis, 2006; Enfield and Levinson, 2006, *inter alia*):⁵

- perspective-taking (awareness of others' perceptual states)
- false belief understanding (truth vs. people's representations of it)
- pro-social instincts (altruism, group living, ethnic co-membership)
- cooperative instincts (capacity for flexible joint action toward a mutual goal)
- Machiavellian instincts (dominance, coalition-building, manipulation, ethnic distinction)
- intention-recognition (attribution of knowledge, belief, desires)
- an intentional stance (intention-attribution to the non-mental realm)
- management and exploitation of mutual knowledge (Schelling thinking)
- a fluid symbolic capacity (sensitivity to social convention)
- docile cultural instincts (propensity to adopt the norms of one's group)
- socially anchored emotional and moral instincts (motives to adhere to and regulate social norms)

These are presumed to reflect universal human capacities, definitive of the cognitive style of our species, and prerequisite for language and culture. But there has been little serious testing of their robustness across cultures (*i.e.* whether these capacities are generically present in individuals in any community), and next to nothing is known of their cultural permeability (*i.e.* whether differences in cultural or linguistic setting may affect the development of such capacities in children). Linguistic and cultural inflection of social intelligence is a matter for empirical research.

The importance of social intelligence in language and culture is its role in the interpretation of others' communicative actions. Communication is a species of social action which involves interdependent processes of assessment and management (Krebs and Dawkins, 1984; Owings and Morton, 1998). Utterances and their equivalents are ways of bringing about effects on the world, both in the celebrated sense of transforming 'official' social statuses as in formal rites of passage (Austin, 1962) and in the more workaday processes of transforming mental states, as all signs do (Kockelman, 2005, 2006a, 2006b). Any individual has capacities to assess their environment, *i.e.* to perceptually explore their surroundings and thereby know new things of consequence (*e.g.* what to pursue, what to avoid). Individuals also act upon or manage their environment. One way of managing the environment is by brute force wielded upon physical objects (*say*, chopping wood for fire). In a social setting, however, the most important components of our environment are other people (*cf.* C. Goodwin, 2006). When people use language, they are using controlled signifying behaviour in order to manage their environment by

bringing about effects upon the mental states (intentional states, emotions, habitus, etc.) of social associates. Like all relationship-grounded creatures, our social action employs ritualized means of communication (Huxley, 1966) which affect the world by causing changes in others' inner states (as opposed to actions which have effects on the world by brute force; cf. Searle, 1969). In managing the social environment in this way, a 'sender' presupposes and exploits other individuals' strategies for management of the social environment (Krebs and Dawkins, 1984; Owings and Morton, 1998).

As analysts, we therefore want to have a clear sense of what these exploitable strategies of assessment are (Enfield, in press). They will include social intelligence capacities along the lines discussed above. These are powerful means for assessing the social world, tools for 'reading' other minds (Byrne and Whiten, 1988; Baron-Cohen, 1995; Enfield and Levinson 2006, *inter alia*).⁶ In the case of humans, the presupposed capacities for assessment will also include massive second-order knowledge of the structured semiotic systems known as grammar and culture.

5.6 Social Norms and Interpretive Heuristics

Language and culture are both built on social norms. Norms are learned patterns of behaviour which are consistent in a community not because it is explicitly stated anywhere that they be followed like rules, but because **not** behaving in a manner consistent with those patterns will be taken as marked, and will attract special attention in the form of surprise or sanction (Wittgenstein, 1953; Garfinkel, 1967; Brandom, 1979; Kockelman, 2006b). Social agency is built on this kind of norm-regulated semiotic commitment, defined as 'the degree to which one anticipates an interpretant [i.e., a meaningful response; NJE], where this anticipation is evinced in being surprised by, and/or disposed to sanction, non-anticipated interpretants' (Kockelman, 2007: 380). Many patterns of language structure and usage are like this, including semantics and grammar. More obviously, the standards of culture are invisible only until they are transgressed (Enfield, 2007).

By contrast, with locally conventional norms, heuristics are logical principles of interpretation which may be generically applied in attributing meaning to tokens of communicative behaviour in specific contexts. This is the basic insight behind Grice's work on meaning (1957) and conversational inference (1975) (cf. also Goffman's idea of framing; 1974, 1981). Grice's insight can be extracted quite apart from any ethnocentrism of his widely maligned conversational maxims (Wierzbicka, 1987, Goddard, 2006). The essential point is as Levinson (2000) puts it, that amplicative enrichment (Grice's implicature) is a smart solution to a thorny bottleneck problem in human communication: we think fast but we speak slow. While Grice's (or Sperber and Wilson's, or Levinson's) claims about particular examples may be quibbled with case by case (Wierzbicka, 1991), the principle is robust: in all cultures, people say more than is said (or convey more than is coded). That is, interpreters of their communicative actions are able to extract more than is simply encoded in the conventions of the semiotic resources deployed (e.g. the dictionary meanings of their words and grammatical constructions). What differs

culturally are the local premises (norms) which feed the process of inference, not the inferential processes themselves (cf. Enfield, 2002, Evans, 2003).

5.7 Language and Culture in Problem-Solving

From this perspective, we can characterize language and culture as tools and contexts for communicative action in management of the social world. The domain of pragmatics, where language and culture come together, may be defined as social problem-solving. Consider what is meant by problem-solving in a more general sense.⁷ If I don't eat every day I get hungry. To solve this, I might engage in a complex cycle of agricultural practice aimed at harvesting enough rice to meet my yearly needs, along with hunting and gathering activities to supplement my staple. Or I need shelter from the weather. To solve this I might build a house.⁸ Many imperatives are imposed by genetic and terrestrial fate, and are thus faced in all cultures. But some imperatives are caused by culture-specific facts. Notice how problems and solutions are nested. Once I have committed to a certain solution, this raises new imperatives (cf. Dunbar, 1988: 26–28). For example, as a professional in a western European socio-economic world, having committed to certain solutions for the problems of food and shelter, I cannot get along without money. So, getting money is a solution which in itself becomes an imperative, a problem-in-need-of-solution. Solutions or strategies will differ widely from human group to human group.⁹ Resources for problem-solving include natural materials (e.g. products of the forest around my village) and culturally acquired tools, instruments and social conventions.

In solving problems in the social realm, our most important resources are semi-otic ones – especially, the historically acquired tools which comprise the expressive resources of any language, along with our social associates and their normative habits of interpretation. We presume that our social associates will have complex powers of assessment (outlined above). Our deployment of expressive resources exploits these powers of assessment as a way of socially managing others in order to bring about the results we desire. For example, I might combine words into utterances, and combine these utterances with the transfer of pieces of paper or coin in order to stave my hunger for the evening. Or I might take my machete to the forest and return with lengths of wood, bamboo, rattan and palm leaf to repair my broken house (usually with the help of neighbours). In both cases, I would typically count my social associates – **other people** – among my problem-solving resources.

5.8 Two Imperatives: Information and Affiliation

At least two imperatives can be argued to apply at all times in social interaction, and are likely to be universal. These are an informational imperative and an affiliational imperative (Enfield 2006).¹⁰ The informational imperative is to ensure

that our attempts at converging with others on symbolic reference are tolerably successful (Clark, 1996). That is, we must ensure that we are being understood by others to a degree sufficient for current communicative purposes. At the same time, the affiliational imperative is to ensure we are appropriately managing the social consequences of any interaction (Goffman, 1959, 1967; Heritage and Raymond, 2005). Every interaction increments an interpersonal relationship by means of building common experience, and displays the nature of that relationship such that it may be evaluated by participants and onlookers (Enfield, 2006). A relationship thinking approach puts this in the foreground.

We might also refer to the affiliational imperative as micro-political or coalitional, in so far as it has to do with establishing the desired relationships, putting the other person in or out of some social circle. We are not just generically subject to an unceasing relationship-consequentiality of social behaviour (and hence obliged to attend to ritual requirements of face; Goffman, 1959, 1967), we are also compelled to maintain relationships of certain proximity types (Hill and Dunbar, 2003). The resultant social structure is an outcome of specific cognitive constraints and a trade-off of numbers of relationships one maintains against time it takes to service them (Dunbar, 1996). Reality is more textured than this thanks to the complexities of sociometry (Rogers, 1995; Enfield, 2003, 2005), by which different individuals solve the trade-off in different ways (distinguishing between, say, 'weak ties connectors' and 'strong ties homebodies'; Granovetter, 1973, 1978). And not everyone is equally adept in matters of affiliation and coalition.

5.9 Conclusion

The theme of this chapter has been that language and culture are deeply implicated in a wide set of common human capacities and social functions. Culture can hardly be learned or enacted without the use of language. And to a great degree, our linguistic practices define our cultural practices. As many have argued, culture is widely enacted in talk (Hymes, 1964; Bauman and Sherzer, 1974; Hanks, 1990, 1996; Sacks, 1992; Wierzbicka, 1992; Sidnell, 2005; inter alia). At the same time, language cannot adequately be described without a framing set of cultural norms and background. They are learned together, and are vastly co-defining and overlapping. While one may ask how language and culture are related, this may wrongly presuppose that they are separable at all (Hill and Mannheim, 1992; Lee, 1996; Enfield, 2000). Instead we may ask: What is the common stuff of which language and culture are built? The answer: They are both cognitive and practical resources for meaningful action on, and through, social relationships.

Notes

- 1 This chapter incorporates revised sections of an article titled 'Relationship thinking and human pragmatics', published by Elsevier in *Journal of Pragmatics*. I am

- grateful to the publisher for permission to reprint revised sections of the article. I am also grateful to Bill Hanks and Paul Kockelman for valuable contributions in discussion, and to Li Wei for advice and support.
- 2 Any investigation of language or culture has to cope with their **reflexive** nature. Because language and culture are systems of meaning; they can be the objects of their own meaning-making (Jakobson, 1971; Silverstein, 1976). This unique property of human systems of meaning gives rise to an all-pervasive trap in the analysis of language and culture: the danger of taking local **ideology** about systems of meaning to be equal to the reality of these systems (cf. Diller and Khanittanan, 2002). So, analysts of both language and culture need to carefully monitor the distinction between members' ideas about their own behaviour, and their behaviour as actually observed. A linguist must ask: Am I describing language? Or is this language about language? Am I describing how people talk, or what they say about how they talk? Similarly for culture.
 - 3 Unlike Ingold I do not see this as incompatible with population thinking (a concept attributed to Darwin: Mayr, 1964: xix–xx; 1970; 1982: 45–47; see Hinde, 1991: 585–586).
 - 4 This does not apply to other complex societies such as those of the ants, since they are not 'individualized' in de Waal and Tyack's sense.
 - 5 These are not necessarily qualitatively distinct. The list merely represents a range of different angles on social intelligence from a range of disciplinary traditions.
 - 6 These are also applied in interpretations of the non-social world (Lévi-Strauss, 1966; Goody, 1995; Atran, 2002).
 - 7 I will sometimes distinguish between imperatives as problems which demand solutions, and strategies as the particular solutions chosen (Dunbar, 1988).
 - 8 See Schutz (1970) and predecessors for a distinction between the 'because motives' which focus on the states of affairs which give rise to actions (I'm picking berries because I'm hungry) and the 'in-order-to motives' which focus on the goals of actions, or the states of affairs which actions will give rise to (I'm picking berries in order to eat them).
 - 9 Among the set of problems-in-need-of-solution, some will be generically present across cultures (e.g. the need to deal with significant problems of speaking, hearing and understanding in conversation; Schegloff, 2006). Others will be present by virtue of culturally distinct factors (e.g. language-particular thinking-for-speaking effects, locally specified requirements of politeness, etc.). That is, some features of code and pragmatics are solutions to problems, some are problems in need of solution. Culture is always a system for solving problems of social life. It's just that some of our problems are caused by the solutions we (habitually) choose and by the nature of our problem-solving resources – i.e. by culture itself.
 - 10 These are akin to Goffman's system versus ritual constraints in face-to-face interaction (Goffman, 1981). Paul Kockelman (personal communication) points out that these correspond roughly to Jakobson's referential and phatic functions of language, two among his six general functions (the other four being emotive, poetic, conative and metalingual; Jakobson, 1960).

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