

Pulling Language Off the Page: Linguistic Anthropology

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Written language is a great convenience, but it distracts us from the true nature of language. Language is dynamic, changing, and a form of social action. Language shapes us, and we shape language. By exploring language and culture, we explore identity formation; by exploring language and society, we become aware of our attitudes toward different language and dialect groups. There is nothing more important to our understanding of these issues than Linguistic Anthropology.

To exemplify these general concepts about language and what Linguistic Anthropology and recent research in the field have to offer, I have organized this short paper into three areas. The first presents an essential exercise on language for students. The second examines the comparative area of languages and dialects. The third addresses ethnography of communication with examples of ongoing and recent research.

Essential Exercise on Language

This essential exercise helps students understand the nature of language, or “*linguaging*” as I sometimes say to emphasize the active quality of language. Students are asked to write a paper, about two pages in length, on a “*text*” that they know better than anyone else—their name. They should write about their name from at least three perspectives, and I give students five possible perspectives to choose from.

The five perspectives are: 1) prior text; 2) structure and variation; 3) interpersonal relations; 4) beauty; and 5) unspokens. Just listing these perspectives is of little benefit, so I give an example of each with an illustration from my own family. This helps to build rapport with students, so I recommend that instructors use a member of their own family if possible. I tend to use my brother’s name—“Herbert Bagley Trix II”—as an example.

The first perspective, prior text, relates well; my brother was clearly named for his paternal grandfather. Prior text is a crucial concept in language, for all language relates to earlier language as a “*prior text*,” but the resonance of names is especially intriguing. As for the second perspective, structure and variation, there is a rhythmic structure to my brother’s name with stress on the first syllable: Hérbert Bágley Tríx the Sécond. For variation, there are nicknames, including “*little Bagel*” and “*Herb*.”

The third perspective, interpersonal relations, can include usage of his name, as when his full name is used, usually in anger. Or interpersonal relations can include the actual naming. He was the long awaited son after two sisters, a single son of a single son, and still his paternal grandparents did not visit the hospital when he was born. As for the fourth perspective of beauty, I would not comment on that with my brother’s name.

The last perspective, unspokens, is important. What is unspoken in my brother’s

name? I usually ask the class this and there is silence for a while. Then someone comes up with it. There is no mention of his mother or his mother's family in my brother's name.

Students like to write about their names and they learn in doing this. When you have returned their papers and discussed them, there are several important points that students are ready to absorb. First, language is complex, therefore it is crucial to have multiple perspectives. Next is the idea of a unit. What constitutes a name? One year, for example, all the female students only wrote about their first names, while the male students wrote about their full names. And then there is the idea of a text. For linguists, a text can be a single word, a phrase, a joke, a song, a story, or a book. It can be oral or written.

Finally, there is the idea of unspoken. Often, what is most important in a culture, what everyone knows, is not said. This is difficult for a person from another culture to fathom. Sometimes, the most important things are not said because they are especially potent, or embarrassing, or frightening.

Now that students realize that language is alive and complex, it is possible to discuss more general areas of different languages and dialects. Here too, there are areas that relate to identity. I often emphasize that linguistic anthropologists study languages and dialects to describe them in context, never to "correct" them toward more standard forms, as students may have encountered in grammar school.

Comparative Area of Languages and Dialects

How many languages are spoken in the United States? Some people say about 350, and New York City has the most variety. Why would that be so? How many languages are spoken in your region? What are they? How many languages are spoken by your students' families? What are they? What is lost when a language is not passed on in a family? Why does this happen so often in America?

How many Native American languages are still spoken? Experts say about 135, but the numbers are rapidly declining. Which Native American languages will survive? Navajo, Yupik in Alaska, and Sioux have the most current speakers. Why do you think these languages have kept the most speakers? What gets lost when a language dies? Jane Hill's article, "Death of Uto-Aztecan" (1983), offers an important perspective on these questions.

What is the difference between a language and a dialect? Most people consider a dialect to be a form of a language that is specific to a geographic region or a social group but that is mutually intelligible by speakers of other dialects of the language. In America, we have five main geographic dialect areas:

- Eastern New England: Maine-Connecticut
- Inland Northern: New York-Michigan-Wisconsin-Montana
- North Midland: New Jersey-Pennsylvania-Ohio-Illinois-Iowa-Colorado-California

- South Midland: West Virginia-Kentucky-Tennessee-Arkansas-Oklahoma-North Texas
- Southern: Virginia-Florida-Louisiana-Texas

Of course, you can make smaller dialect divisions within these, but these are the general dialect areas. Great Britain has many more main dialect areas, but geographically it is much smaller than America. Why do you think this is so?

An interesting American dialect is African American Vernacular English (AAVE), sometimes referred to as Black English. Unlike the American dialects referred to above, African American Vernacular English is not geographically based. That is, a speaker of Black English in New York will have similar features in his or her dialect to a speaker of Black English in Los Angeles, although there will be some different regional terms.

When I teach about Black English, I like to refer to works by famous Black English writers. Most wrote in Standard English, but some included dialogue in their novels or poems in Black English. One such writer is Langston Hughes (1902-1967), who was from Joplin, Missouri, just south of Kansas City. He was a poet, a novelist, a translator, and a playwright. He was part of what is known as the “Harlem Renaissance” and was criticized early in his career for writing poetry in Black English when this was not in style.

Below is a poem that Langston Hughes wrote in 1920. It has some archaic features that are not part of Black English today. For example “Ise” is a nineteenth century form no longer used. Still, it is a powerful poem with other features of Black English. Ask a

student to read the poem aloud if he or she is comfortable doing so. Otherwise, see if you can find it read aloud in Black English on the web.

Mother to Son

*Well, son, I'll tell you:
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
It's had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor --
Bare.
But all the time
I've been a-climbin' on,
And reachin' landin's,
And turnin' corners,
And sometimes goin' in the dark
Where there ain't been no light.
So boy, don't you turn back.
Don't you set down on the steps
'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.
Don't you fall now --
For I've still goin', honey,
I've still climbin',
And life for me ain't been no crystal
stair.*

--Langston Hughes, 1920

Ask students: What social conditions in the Black community did this poem reflect? Why do dialects of minority groups persist over time? Where are they learned? Think about such dialects as symbols of the home, of intimacy, of identity, of solidarity, and of culture.

At the same time, it is important to know what African American Vernacular English is not. It is not slang. Slang is made up of just

words or phrases, it is informal language, and it is constantly changing. In contrast, a dialect is patterned and linguistically ordered. Read John R. Rickford's article, "Suite for Ebony and Phonics" (1997), and learn how Black English actually has more verb forms than Standard English (see also Rickford 2000).

At the same time, speakers of African American Vernacular English also need to be bi-dialectal in American society today. That is, they also need Standard English.

Ethnography of Communication

When Dell Hymes, a famous American linguistic anthropologist came up with the idea of "ethnography of speaking" in the 1960s, a colleague at the University of Pennsylvania, sociologist Erving Goffman, told him he should reframe it as "ethnography of communication." Goffman was a specialist in face-to-face communication. Think how much broader "communication" is than "speaking." Communication includes the important area of non-verbal communication. Dell Hymes wisely listened to his colleague.

Ethnography of communication includes many areas of research. I will present just a few of these areas—from health care communication and gender discourse to political discourse and remembering war rape—to give an idea of the richness of the studies in this field. Any important area of interaction in context can be studied here. Social media are also increasingly important in shaping social life in these areas as well.

One of the earliest areas to be studied in ethnography of communication relates broadly to health care. Doctor-patient

communication was a particular focus for practical reasons. Diagnosis has always been understood to be a complex interactive process. Further, professionals in medical education realized that young doctors needed assistance in interacting with patients of different social backgrounds. Recording technologies that had not been available in the past could assist in this process.

One of the earliest studies here is "Ask Me No Questions..." by Candace West (1983). In this study, a former cancer patient is trying to get information from a doctor, but neither is able to say the word "cancer." It turns out the patient's cancer had returned. There are many more studies in the field of health care. A whole book dedicated to this is Nancy Ainsworth-Vaughn's *Claiming Power in Doctor-Patient Talk* (1998). Ainsworth-Vaughn's mother had cancer and Ainsworth-Vaughn helped her through the maze of health care. Then she herself came down with cancer, and she continued to study doctor-patient interactions and relationships when the doctors and patients were of similar social backgrounds; this built on many earlier studies that had been done in large urban settings. Ainsworth-Vaughn died of cancer in 2001 at age 59.

Another important area of ethnography of communication is gender discourse. Early studies here focused on cross-gender talk in interactions between couples. Researchers found differences in verbal behavior that some studies tried to explain through differences in socialization (see Maltz and Borker 1982). However, ongoing studies continued to note ways that men tended to silence women (see DeFrancisco's "The Sounds of Silence: How Men Silence Women in Marital Relations," 1998).

Gender Research quickly moved beyond couple's discourse to other settings, including the family dinner table and professional settings. Deborah Tannen is an important American researcher in gender discourse. She conducted a study of talk among friends at a Thanksgiving Day gathering in California where people's regional backgrounds prompted different interactional styles (see *Conversational Style: Analyzing Talk among Friends*, 1984). She has also studied gender differences in professional settings (see her chapter "Who Gets Heard at Meetings? Talking at Meetings," 1994).

Another gender researcher, Britisher Deborah Cameron, has studied single-gender talk. Her work on talk among men is especially interesting (see "Performing Gender Identity: Young Men's Talk and the Construction of Heterosexual Masculinity," 1997).

Finally, there are studies of written language and gender. I was asked by a prestigious medical school to study letters of recommendation for medical faculty to see if there were systematic differences between letters written for male medical faculty and female medical faculty. I studied over 300 such letters and indeed found systematic differences in doubt raisers and in the frequency of mention of status terms. Further, common language formulations throughout the letters reinforced gender schema that tended to portray the female applicants as teachers and students and the male applicants as researchers and professionals (Trix and Psenka 2003).

A third area of ethnography of communication is political discourse. Many studies have focused on written

communication, namely political speeches. There is a remarkable study of President Lincoln's Gettysburg Address by Gary Wills called *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words that Remade America* (1992). Wills examines prior texts, structure, interactive elements, and even an unspoken in that he posits that the Gettysburg Address can only be fully understood in concert with Lincoln's later speech, his "Second Inaugural." It is also interesting to compare speeches by Martin Luther King, Jr., such as his "I Have a Dream" speech in Washington, D.C., in 1963 and his last speech, "I Have Been to the Mountaintop," addressed to sanitation workers in Memphis in 1968.

Presidential election years are wonderful times to analyze political communication. It is interesting to report differences in how male and female candidates are portrayed by the media. Do reporters always comment on the female candidates' hair and clothes and rarely on the hair and clothes of the male candidates? Ask students to consider why or to reflect on social media during and after a debate. How different are the comments? Contrast different social media on a particular debate.

To try to understand how a candidate seeks to present him or herself to a particular audience, consider videos of two speeches of the same candidate and examine features such as non-verbal communication and how the candidate opens the speech, closes the speech, takes questions, and behaves after the formal part of the speech.

Finally, I will close with an unusual example of ethnography of communication from my own recent research. I have long studied Muslim communities in the Balkans.

In the newest Balkan country of Kosova, there was a war in 1998-1999 when it was still part of the former Yugoslavia. An estimated 20,000 Kosovar Albanian girls and women were raped by soldiers and paramilitary forces. Kosovar Albanian society is conservative and there was shame and silence regarding this tragedy.

Recently, there have been governmental actions to consider women who suffered sexual violence in the war as “civilian war victims” and therefore eligible to collect health benefits. But many women were still too ashamed to come forward. The question many asked was how to move from silence to public voice in initiating talk about war rape, a taboo topic? And how to move from isolation to public solidarity for women who had suffered war rape?

A Kosovar Albanian artist, Alketa Xhafa-Mripa, pronounced [Jafa-Mreepa,] came up

with the idea of an artistic installation that would hang thousands of women’s skirts and dresses on clothes lines in the football stadium in the capital city of Prishtina, Kosovo. The women who were violated, as well as their sisters in solidarity, would donate the skirts. The clothes lines would symbolize that the women are clean and pure, and the football stadium was the most masculine place in the whole country.

The President of Kosovo, Atifete Jahjaga, donated her skirt first. This was very important for it guaranteed publicity for the event and support from the very top of the political ladder. Then the artist and her supporters went all over Kosovo, collecting skirts and dresses from women who had suffered and from other women who wanted to donate in solidarity. They collected 5,000 skirts and hung them on forty-three clothes lines in the football stadium in Prishtina.



5,000 hanging skirts to evoke the enormity of the crime against so many Kosovar women so it could not be denied. (Image credit: Atdhe Mulla)

On June 12, 2015, National Liberation Day, the day NATO troops came into Prishtina in 1999, the installation of five thousand skirts and dresses was dedicated. President Atifete Jahjaga gave a memorable speech in the stadium asserting that the nation could not be at peace until the women whose skirts these were also were at peace. The view of 5,000 skirts waving in the wind made it clear that no woman was alone. And all the talk on the radio and television in the build-up to the installation had opened the topic of war rape. Hopefully this lessened the sense of shame than the women had been living under (see Trix 2015).

Conclusion

With Linguistic Anthropology and understanding the power of “linguaging,” we are not restricted to notions of language bound only to the written page. Rather, we see language as dynamic and complex, and therefore requiring multiple perspectives. Recall the perspectives we called on to consider our own names: prior text, structure and variations, interaction, beauty, and unspokens. All language is prior text, for it builds on earlier language. And keep the notion of unspokens with you always. The closer a friendship, the more unspokens there are likely to be. They can be a source of great pleasure when you can communicate with only a glance and your friend knows exactly what you mean. But they can cause major miscommunication when people assume others share them and they do not. Cross-culturally, they are a mine-field.

At the same time, language is a form of social action that shapes us and that we also

shape. People’s names matter; their languages and dialects also matter.

Communications with professionals and friends matter. Ethnography of communication analyzes such interactions. As we read such studies, we become more aware and observant. We value our own backgrounds and what others bring as well.

And sometimes, with artistic inspiration and political help, we can even reach out to break silence and isolation, as happened in Kosovo in June of 2015 with the artistic installation of 5,000 hanging skirts in the football stadium in Prishtina, along with the support and clear words of the woman President and the media of the country.

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