

Semiotic Anthropology

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Abstract

From the 1970s through the present, semiotic anthropology has grown in importance but also has shifted its emphasis, in the process helping to push forward a more general change in the subfields of linguistic and sociocultural anthropology. This article explores that change from the vantage of each of these key subfields, arguing that core concepts of semiotic anthropology have permitted a new rapprochement between sociocultural and linguistic analyses—one which permits each to make better use of the insights of the other. It has also aided anthropologists in overcoming stale conceptual oppositions. Five specific points of contact are explored: (a) indexicality and social context; (b) metalinguistic structuring/linguistic ideology, pragmatics, and social interaction; (c) social power, history, and linguistic interaction; (d) agency, linguistic creativity, and “real time”; and (e) shifting sites, units of analysis, and methods.

INTRODUCTION

A survey of the past 30 years of semiotic anthropology reveals a number of shifts in the field. In this review article, I take up the somewhat daunting challenge of describing these shifts and assessing some of their more important dimensions. In conclusion, I offer the usual coda in endeavors of this type: the obligatory gaze into possible futures.

BACKGROUND AND CORE CONCEPTS

Taking advantage of a new semiotic technology, I undertook several brief Internet searches of the term semiotic anthropology as a preliminary exercise in preparing to write this article. I was not surprised to find myself repeatedly directed to a core text by Milton Singer, *Man's Glassy Essence* (1984). Although the roots of semiotics in anthropology arguably go back much further (not to mention the far-reaching tradition of semiotics as a field unto itself), it was Singer (1978) who urged the use of the label "semiotic anthropology" to demarcate an analytic approach based in renewed anthropological attention to the work of Charles Sanders Peirce. (Claude Levi-Strauss (1963), for example, drew on semiotic theory but labeled his trademark approach "structural anthropology.") Singer felt that Peirce's work would offer anthropology an important tool for linking the analysis of meaning to social context. He contrasted a Peircean framework with one derived more from Ferdinand de Saussure: "Both Peirce and Saussure aimed to develop general theories of signs, . . . Peirce, however, defined the sign-process in terms of a triadic relation of sign, object, and interpretant (or semiosis), while Saussure defined the dyadic structure of signifier and signified" (Singer 1985, p. 550). Singer noted that by problematizing the relationship of signs and interpretants with their objects, Peirce pushes scholars to integrate issues of social context more systematically into the analysis of meaning.

Peirce's framework for studying how signs carry meaning, then, opens the door for an analysis that includes but moves beyond language. Rather than focusing on language per se, Peirce asks us to consider the varieties of ways in which meaning can be conveyed through the sign: "a sign. . . is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity" (Peirce 1974). We begin with the "sign vehicle" (or "representamen"), the signal doing the communicating—whether it be the wave of a hand, an architect's design, or a spoken word. This sign vehicle communicates something by virtue of creating a connection between an object (whatever the sign stands for) and an interpretant (the idea or mental representation now created in our minds).

For example, imagine that a friend has left a clue to her whereabouts by drawing a triangle. A pyramid is nearby. When you look at the drawing of the triangle (the sign vehicle), a connection is formed between the actual pyramid (object) and an idea in your head (your "mental representation" of a pyramid). There are many ways that sign vehicles can create this relationship. In this case, the drawing (triangle) creates a connection with the object (pyramid) by virtue of an inherent similarity. Peirce calls this kind of connection iconic. [Lyons (1977) notes that written signs tend to be iconic as to shape, whereas spoken signs create iconic connections more through sound—and in both cases we find somewhat varying conventions across different cultures.]

Let us say, however, that instead of her leaving a picture of a triangle, your friend constructed a large sign with an arrow and left it right next to the pyramid, pointing at it. The connection that you now can make between the sign vehicle (the sign with an arrow) and the pyramid (object) is based on physical contiguity, on a contextual connection. In Peircean terms, this is an indexical connection.

Finally, the friend could write a note explaining that she is at the pyramid. Here the written word "pyramid" only creates a

connection with the object (the actual pyramid) because of a linguistic convention or law—what Peirce denominates a symbolic connection.

A great deal of standard linguistic and cultural analysis in anthropology had typically focused on this kind of symbolic or conventional meaning. Peirce challenges us to locate that kind of analysis within a broader contextual framework that includes other kinds of important anchoring of cultural meaning. In particular, anthropologists have been examining the complicated mechanisms by which more contextually dependent forms of meaning (the indexical or “pragmatic” level) interact with less contextual, more conventional kinds of meaning (the symbolic or semantic level, focused more on language content than form). (See Morris 1971 on the semantic/pragmatic distinction.) A further complication is introduced by the need to incorporate analysis of meanings that derive from language-internal formal structures such as grammar or syntax.

The question of contextual meaning had not been ignored in other traditions. Notably, Saussure (1959) himself had proposed a distinction between *langue* (language as abstract structure) and *parole* (spoken language, the realization or instantiation of *langue* in “real time”). However, the core insights of Saussure’s work remained focused on language as an abstract, static system—a synchronic approach that was criticized from a number of angles (see, e.g., Vološínov 1973, arguing that it is misleading to conceptualize language structure as distinct from ongoing usage and change). The Prague School linguists also took exception to Saussure’s approach, stressing the importance of using a diachronic perspective to study linguistic change over time (Jakobson 1971). In the late 1970s, anthropologists such as Singer urged the field to take another look at the tools offered by Prague School, Peircean, and other traditions that had focused systematically on issues of meaning, context, and history.

Singer’s proposal led to a testy but interesting exchange with Leach in the pages

of the *American Ethnologist*. After complaining about the arcane character of Peircean terminology, Leach took Singer to task for characterizing Saussure and Peirce as representatives of opposing rather than compatible positions. Leach then further took exception to the “Chicago dogma that ‘cultures [or selves] are systems of symbols and meanings’” and memorably concludes, “I cannot believe that the way of escape from the jungle of Parisian structuralism...lies through groves of academe that were planted in Columbia and Chicago sometime before 1934” (Leach 1985, p. 156). Singer disagreed with Leach’s characterization, saying that the anthropology faculty at Chicago in the 1970s did not share a dogma and that few of his “present or former Chicago colleagues have been converted to ‘semiotic anthropology,’” noting one exception in his colleague Michael Silverstein (Singer 1985). Taking a different stance than did Leach, Fernandez (1986) noted in his review of Singer’s book that he detected the possible seeds of a new synthesis of Saussure and Peirce in some of Singer’s ideas—particularly in Singer’s emphasis on indexicality. Fernandez and Leach did agree on one criticism of Singer’s work, which was that it at times seemed to drift into using a theory of “national character” that did not adequately account for pluralism and diversity within nation states, painting “culture” with overly broad strokes.

Although the field developed subsequently in somewhat different directions than those found in Singer’s early foray, key concepts from Peirce and Morris did indeed continue to find their places in the tradition that developed from the late 1970s until today. In addition, the potential new synthesis of Saussurean, Peircean, Prague School, and other perspectives discerned by Fernandez has borne productive fruit. For more detailed discussions of important Peircean and other concepts used in semiotic anthropology, see Chandler (2007); Lee (1997), Lee & Urban (1989); Mertz (1985); Parmentier (1985, 1994, 1997); Sebeok (1978); and Silverstein

(1976). Calls for a new kind of semiotic approach in anthropology proliferated during the 1980s, including a proposed focus on the crucial role of semiotic mediation in society (Mertz & Parmentier 1985; the original proposal for this focus within this particular group of scholars originated with John Lucy). Scholars in this growing tradition drew on the insights of a number of different schools of thought, from Peirce and Saussure through the Prague School (1929), Whorf (1956), Sapir (1970), Vygotsky (1962), and Bakhtin (1981)/Vološinov (1973). A core figure in this movement was Michael Silverstein, a linguistic anthropologist who had studied with Jakobson and whose work synthesized a number of traditions in linguistics, semiotics, and cultural anthropology (see, e.g., Silverstein 1979, 1981, 1985, 1993). Of course many scholars have contributed to the development of semiotic approaches within anthropology, just as was the case in the “symbolic anthropology” paradigm so often associated, ideal-typically, with the work of Geertz (1977, 1983).

FROM SYMBOLIC TO SEMIOTIC ANTHROPOLOGY

Like many other conceptual constructs in this article, the formula of “symbolic to semiotic” here is meant more as a heuristic than as a cut-and-dried map of real divisions. To this day, the concepts of “symbolic” and “semiotic” continue to have considerable overlap—as well they should, given their intellectual genealogies. Geertz spoke of a “semiotic approach to culture” and urged that the cultural analysis of meaning should include consideration of “political, economic, and stratificatory realities” (Geertz 1977, p. 30). Turner, although he spoke frequently of analyzing symbols and semantic dimensions of culture, nevertheless also argued for the importance of social and historical context, stressing, for example, the “operational” aspect of symbolic meaning that derives from symbols’ actual use (Turner 1973, 1974). Boon (1982) actually

locates Geertz as the Peircean when comparing Geertz and Lévi-Strauss (Lévi-Strauss being more Saussurean). Mary Douglas (1966), another well-known figure in earlier symbolic anthropology, drew on her own fieldwork among the Lele to connect social organization with semiotic structures.

But the labels here serve as handy signals of a very subtle shift in emphasis that is worth tracking. As I proceeded with the Internet search described above, I rapidly moved from the familiar work of Singer and Parmentier to surface indications of a deeper sea change since the 1970s: many colleagues who now list “semiotic anthropology” or “symbolic and semiotic anthropology” among their specialties; and anthropology departments with courses, specialties, or foci in semiotic rather than symbolic anthropology—indeed an entire subdivision of the Department of Anthropology at the University of Toronto that calls itself “Linguistic and Semiotic Anthropology.” It is worth examining this program’s self-description:

Linguistic and semiotic anthropologists study how language and other systems of human communication contribute to the reproduction, transmission, and transformation of culture...[including] such aspects of society as power relations, ideology, subcultural expression, as well as class, gender, and ethnic identity. (http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/anthropology/backup_website/linguistic.htm)

Here we see an anthropological linguistics program explicitly including the study of social context as an intrinsic part of linguistic analysis, as well as carefully explaining that the focus of concern is not limited to language per se. On the other side, many sociocultural anthropologists are explicitly including the study of language and discourse in their research programs as semiotic anthropologists. In the domain once mapped more commonly as symbolic anthropology, there certainly had been frequent discussion of language, but proceeding from different foundations

(for examples, see Dolgin et al. 1977). The linguistic analysis accompanying today's semiotic anthropology traces the details of language usage "on the ground," driven in part by a focus on pragmatics and indexicality [see Morris (1971) for a seminal discussion of pragmatics; see also Verschueren (1999) and Duranti (1997); and see Basso & Selby (1976) for a collection of essays that bridges different approaches]. This newer analysis also unites strands from a number of traditions, so that issues of linguistic structure, "real time" usage, culture, social structure, cognition, history, ideology, and metalanguage can all be treated together. Let us look in more detail, then, at the substantive result of this move to the semiotic.

Reconfiguring Language/Society/Culture: Indexicality, Social Contexts, and Cultural Meaning

As anthropologists have worked to build a semiotic paradigm for studying language, culture, and society, they have developed concepts capable of analyzing with greater sophistication the confluence of these great arenas of human life and interaction. (From one perspective, these arenas can only be understood as separate, to begin with, because we wrenched them apart analytically. However, having done this in an effort to gain some purchase on an overwhelming subject, we face the difficult task of putting them back together with "integrity"!)

In particular, a focus on indexical structure and meaning has moved linguistic and sociocultural anthropologists to a fertile shared ground, in which it is possible to retain precision about the operation of language while also looking more broadly at the social and cultural terrain. In an early article, Silverstein (1976) refocused the field's attention on the importance of the pragmatic and indexical aspects of language and culture. In subsequent decades, an integrative discussion has emerged among scholars with seemingly diverse research programs, ranging from sociolinguistics to

cognitive anthropology to analyses of power dynamics formerly associated with economic anthropology. There are many important threads in this developing discussion, to which I can do only cursory justice. For example, in addition to the traditions discussed above, ranging from Saussure to Sapir, the emerging synthesis integrates many rich insights from sociolinguistics, conversation analysis (CA), and ethnomethodology about the contextual structuring of language (see, e.g., Gumperz 1982, Labov 1972, Sacks et al. 1978, Schegloff 1972). The work of scholars who had performed pioneering ethnographies of language socialization (Ochs 1988, Schieffelin 1990) could now be brought into an analytic framework that also encompassed research on politics, law, and hegemony (Gal 2005; Woolard 2004; Mertz 1994, 2007; Brenneis & Myers 1984, Briggs 1996). The politics of identity—the struggles around race, gender, sexuality, citizenship, and other issues—could be unpacked in detailed linguistic accounts that also examined local, national, and other contexts (see, e.g., Agha 2006, Briggs & Mantini-Briggs 2000, Herzfeld 1985).

Duranti (2003) notes the trade-off involved in this new integration: Linguistic anthropology became increasingly accessible to sociocultural anthropology, but perhaps at the price of diminishing its connections with more traditional linguistic approaches. He observes that some of the anthropologists working at this new intersection do not have the training in technical linguistics that was more common in earlier generations of linguistic anthropologists. However, Duranti notes the vibrant generativity of the newer approach, which he credits with revitalizing the field of anthropological linguistics and bringing issues of language and discourse into the heart of work in sociocultural anthropology. In an enlightening review of the literature, Duranti distinguishes three phases of research, which he somewhat controversially characterizes as distinct paradigms: (a) an earlier phase that focused on language as lexicon and grammar, and on the differing world views

and constellations of language form associated with different languages/cultures; (b) a phase that began in the 1960s, spurred by the birth of sociolinguistics and the ethnography of speaking (here Duranti emphasizes the influence of Gumperz and Hymes) and characterized by a shift to analyzing variations across speech communities rather than just grammars [Duranti also discusses further developments in this second phase that refocused the field's attention on performance, language socialization, indexicality (via the Silversteinian framework), and participation]; and finally (c) a recent phase in which language is viewed as "an interactional achievement filled with indexical values (including ideological ones)" (2003, p. 333). In this most recent phase, we see a dramatic broadening of research parameters so that language analysis is now seen as providing one important cornerstone to understanding how identities, institutions, and communities are reproduced and transformed. This occurs across history and through various semiotic media (written texts, speech, the Internet), with fascinating variations and interlinking influences within and between communities and larger units of sociocultural organization.

This article thus far paints a very rosy picture of the new scholarly synthesis emerging in and through semiotic anthropology. However, of course, nothing is that simple. For example, the newer scholarship cheerfully acknowledges the importance of the local organization of talk that is so central to ethnomethodological and CA research, incorporating analysis of features such as turn-taking (see, e.g., Conley & O'Barr 1998; Matoesian 2001, 1993; Philips 1984). However, some CA scholars have taken strenuous exception to the way the newer research sometimes moves out of the bounds of the local situation to look at broader issues of social structure and power (see Travers 2006; for a moderate approach on this question, see Maynard 2006). Scholars such as Travers view the new semiotic anthropological approach as violating of one of their fundamental methodological tenets, which requires researchers to focus on the local in-

teractionally created meanings to which participants themselves subscribe. In this view, importation of wider questions of power and social stratification is an improper imposition of the researchers' own frameworks and questions. One frequent response to this position is to question whether in fact CA scholars are not also importing frameworks from outside the participants' situation—but in a more unexamined way (Conley 2006; see Yovel 2000 for an argument that language always imports normativity, albeit in disguised ways).

Thus, we should certainly be aware of the controversies involved in achieving a synthetic semiotic model that incorporates some of the strengths of multiple, quite diverse traditions. On the other hand, by anchoring the analysis in an examination of indexical use and structure, newer approaches have developed a coherent analytic framework that permits anthropologists to take account of grammar; the local organization of talk; flows and constructions of identity and cultural ideas; social stratification; and other aspects of sociocultural life, which had often been analyzed using seemingly obdurate theoretical divisions. If indeed the ethnography and observation performed under diverse models have captured important aspects of multifaceted, complicated human existence, then it seems important to find ways to integrate the different "parts of the elephant" to the degree that we can. By proceeding in this way, anthropology can avoid the search for "linguistic magic bullets" against which Briggs (2002) rightfully warned us, turning instead to a more productive meeting place that begins from a view of languages as "loci of heterogeneity, agency, and creativity" (p. 493).

Structure and Context Revisited: Pragmatics, Metalinguistic Structure, Linguistic Ideology, and Social Interaction

This section examines the impact of semiotic anthropology on sociocultural analysis, whereas the section that follows reverses

direction and asks how recent developments have impacted linguistic anthropological research. As noted above, the move to a semiotic approach grounded in a Peircean-inspired focus on indexicality and pragmatics has been influential in bringing renewed attention to linguistic analysis within the broader field of sociocultural anthropology. One fascinating by-product of this interest has been the variety of anthropological questions and social theories that have found some common ground in the study of indexicality (and see Preucel 2006 for an extension into archeology). A semiotic framework pushes sociocultural anthropologists to achieve greater precision about the role language plays at both the micro and macro levels in human interaction, as well as about how these levels might connect with one another. Along the way, this work has required a fairly continual questioning and reworking of the concept of "context" in an effort to take account of both sociocultural and linguistic concerns (Duranti & Goodwin 1992).

One contribution of semiotic anthropology to this process is the set of analytic tools it offers for tracking the complex layering of contexts at work in any social interaction. For example, we can examine the shifting location of a speaker vis-à-vis layers of social authority through studying "footing," a concept absorbed by semiotic anthropologists from Goffman's (1981) work. A speaker may be located as simply the *animator* of an utterance whose real *author* is someone else (as, for example, someone delivering a speech written by another person). And even the author may not be the ultimate source of authority, or *principal*—i.e., the person ultimately responsible for the speech in question (say, for example, the board of directors of an organization that hired a speechwriter to write a speech, and also a spokesperson to deliver it). Close examination of how the indexical anchoring of footing works in settings such as courts and legislatures, along with analyses of other linguistic processes, can provide a window into the way larger social issues are enacted in particular speech situations (Hirsch 1998,

Matoesian 2001, Philips 1998). Local interactional orders in the management of talk during trials can now be linked with institutional and other contexts in a way that gives insight into both (for an example of how footing plays a role in other institutional settings, see Agha 2005).

A similarly useful window into layers of context from the micro level to the macro level is provided by semiotic anthropological research on performance and on the impact of audience on talk (Bauman 1986, Bauman & Briggs 1990, Brenneis 1987, Duranti & Brenneis 1986). Performance and audience are both issues that require us to examine indexical connections between speech and social context. They also allow us to see the intimate interconnection between language structure and usage. Furthermore, as we discover the subtle and obvious ways that pragmatic meaning emerges from the interaction of audience and speaker, we are drawn to examine their social relationships, the institutional setting in which they are interacting, the cultural contexts and shared assumptions in play, and many other aspects of setting that have long been the special province of sociocultural anthropologists.

In recent years, research in semiotic anthropology has focused on metalinguistic structure and linguistic ideology as key points at which structure and context (both linguistic and social) meet (Schieffelin et al. 1998, Silverstein & Urban 1996). Analysis of these meeting points can provide tools for social-cultural analysis of how language mediates in ongoing social practices, from the daily and local to wider social struggles such as those over national identity or political power (see, e.g., Gal 1998). Silverstein (1993) has formulated a rich account of how metalinguistic activity is structured, including the complex modes of calibration required for speakers to actually comprehend one another. This subtle and exacting account allows us to follow the minute-to-minute processes by which our metalinguistic processes bring our understanding of language into regular contact

with our social contexts. We are, with varying degrees of awareness, fitting our ongoing interactions into *interactional texts*, which make sense of what we are doing at a metalinguistic (and metapragmatic) level.

As we approach a more explicit and institutionalized level, we find broader ideologies of language playing an important metalinguistic role, mediating between the everyday details of our interactions and wider social and political struggles. The topic of linguistic ideology could merit an entire article on its own and is a very fruitful current area for research (see Schieffelin et al. 1998). In studying linguistic ideology, we are also brought to ask about speakers' metalinguistic awareness (see Mertz & Yovel 2000): For example, to what degree are ideologies consciously mobilized, as opposed to operating as a less conscious, taken-for-granted backdrop? Woolard (1998) notes that scholars working on linguistic ideology vary in the degree to which they incorporate speakers' explicit articulation of beliefs into their definition of "ideology." Heath (1989), for example, views linguistic ideology as "self-evident ideas and objectives a group holds" (p. 53), whereas the authors in Joseph & Taylor (1990) analyze explicit discussions of language produced by linguists. Woolard (1989) provides an overarching definition: "Representations, whether explicit or implicit, that construe the intersection of language and human beings in a social world are what we mean by 'language ideology'" (p. 3).

A New Détente: Social Power, History, and Linguistic Interaction

We turn now to ask about the other side of this rapprochement between linguistic and sociocultural anthropology: What has been the impact of this turn to semiotics on anthropological analyses of language? As we have noted, one obvious effect has been the opening of linguistic anthropology to more sophisticated analyses of social and cultural contexts. These analyses take account of, but can also move beyond, the immediate so-

cial surroundings of a linguistic exchange, examining institutional, national, and global contexts. The semiotic focus on indexicality has opened the window of anthropological linguistic analysis to a more systematic consideration of how power and meaning interact. And the resulting framework, because it was formulated from the linguistic ground level up, is capable of speaking to a variety of different social-theoretic frameworks, from DuBois (1903) to Giddens (1976) to Bourdieu (1977) to Foucault (1991) and others (see, e.g., Chandler 1997 on DuBois, Matoesian 1993 on Giddens, Gal 1991 on Bourdieu, and Kockelman 2006 on Foucault—note also congruence with Postone 1993). It has also moved linguistic anthropologists to examine the situated character of language practices in organizing and responding to "lived space" (see, e.g., Hanks 1990, Haviland 2000).

Perhaps the most striking result of this movement toward the semiotic, in both linguistic and sociocultural anthropology, is the way it has helped to overcome an entrenched (and not particularly useful) division between idealist or symbolic approaches and more materialist forms of analysis. Influential ethnographic research that might formerly have been categorized simplistically as materialist (because it takes seriously the impact of capitalism and class divisions) now regularly also incorporates analysis of the semiotic dimensions of global and local capitalism (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991, 1999). Linguistic research that might have stopped after parsing local meanings now frequently considers how the linguistic processes at work fit into wider institutional structuring (see Irvine 1989; and just to take one particular institutional context, see Collins & Blot 2003 and Wortham & Rymes 2003 on language in educational settings).

Analyzing Contingency: Agency, Linguistic Creativity, and "Real Time"

Another fascinating meeting place for linguistic and sociocultural analyses is in the issue of

how to conceptualize contingency in both language and society/culture. To what degree do individual speakers have room for creativity, operating as they are against the backdrop of linguistic structure and presuppositions? To what degree do any of us have agency as we live within the boundaries set by our surrounding contexts? Furthermore, how can we as scholars use our own categories to capture the unpredictable, the contingent, the actual flow of human interaction and talk, the realization of structure (or not) in “real time”?

Semiotic anthropology has moved to an increasingly complex and sophisticated understanding of this process. As noted above, this has been aided by Silverstein's (1993) emerging framework for analyzing the intricacies of metapragmatic structure, interactional text, and similar processes—a scaffolding upon which a number of scholars have built with very interesting results. This framework permits us to examine the way contingent, “real time” language use interacts with regularities of linguistic, cultural, and social structures—a very challenging task, given the quite different character of these two inputs to communication. From a somewhat different but quite compatible perspective, Greenhouse (2002) has written powerfully about semiotic approaches to reconfiguring how we conceptualize the structure-agency relationship. She has also challenged us (1996) to think carefully about how the semiotics of time, whether “real” or otherwise, interact with culture and politics.

Another road that semiotic anthropologists have taken into this thorny issue is the study of the “self”—of the way that people themselves operate at the intersection of agency and structure (Crapanzano 1993, Lee 1997, Lee & Urban 1989). Shaw (1994), for example, studies the way signs of identity among adolescents both mediate an evolving sense of self and forge a continuing indexical connection with particular communities, social statuses, and histories. Young people are at once in constant interaction with the social structures around them, while ex-

erting agency in their constructions of self. Lee (1997) takes this to another level, unpacking the way that performative language similarly constitutes notions of peoplehood, now at a national level, at the intersection of indexical structure and contingent social histories. In often-cited work, Hill & Irvine (1993a) use linguistic analysis of responsibility and evidence in spoken discourse to demonstrate the limitations of asocial models of the self. The marriage of semiotics and psychology within language analysis owes much to roots in the work of Vygotsky (1962; see also Wertsch 1985; Hickmann 1985). Another important foundation for work in language and psychology is the tradition emanating from research by Benjamin Lee Whorf (1956; see also Lucy 1992a,b, 1993a).

Shifting Sites, Units of Analysis, and Methods: From Entextualization to Globalization

A further advantage of semiotic anthropology for today's sociocultural anthropologists is that it supports more flexible and expansive approaches to defining where and how we can do our research. Although the study of smaller-scale communities remains a crucial task for sociocultural anthropology, it has become increasingly difficult to limit our fieldwork to more traditional sites. A semiotic focus gives us useful analytical tools for examining the world of global interconnections, where texts and other potentially more arm's-length forms of communication can become as important as face-to-face linguistic interaction.

Recent decades have seen a blossoming of fruitful anthropological frameworks for studying text and textuality in social context. In a much-cited article on the subject, Bauman & Briggs (1990) explained foundational concepts for developing a more processual approach to studying textuality (see also Briggs & Bauman 1992, Silverstein & Urban 1996). These concepts trace the process by which segments of text become

segmented or extractable (entextualization), removed from one context (decontextualization), and put into a new context (recontextualization). Silverstein (1996) distinguishes between the “text artifact” (the physical object, such as printed words on a page) and the varieties of more abstract text associated with these text artifacts. For example, we can speak of the *denotational text* associated with a particular printed story (i.e., what this story means in a denotational or semantic sense), as opposed to the *interactional text* (what the act of reading or reciting this story does in a social sense). This approach to the study of texts permits us to examine the dynamic process through which interpreters invoke features of texts while creating and shaping their contexts of use. Again, the semiotic framework encourages us to think about the indexical and contextual anchoring of meaning. This focus extends to the examination of contextual connections among texts themselves with the concept of “intertextuality,” suggested in earlier work by the famed semiotician Kristeva (1986). With this richer view in mind, semiotic analyses have been able to reach a better understanding of how textual traditions interact with history and politics (see, e.g., Messick 1992).

Clearly, this approach moves us beyond a narrow understanding of text as written document. It thereby facilitates an expansion of anthropological research, carried out within a coherent framework, to different media. This provides us with important tools for studying the linkages in an increasingly globalized world, which often move through diverse media. This approach also aids us in making analytical connections between wider processes of capitalist expansion and the local situations that anthropologists more typically studied.

Worth (1977), for example, argued that the semiotic analysis of film should include a more “ethnographic and empirical approach,” at the same time urging scholars to study newscasts as well as movie theatres, pictures as well as paintings, all books rather than canonical literature. He would undoubtedly have agreed

with Jules-Rosette’s argument (1984) that anthropologists should pay more serious attention to tourist art, situated as it is at a crucial semiotic nexus between global aesthetics and markets, on the one hand, and local social, artistic, and political norms, on the other hand.

In creative adaptations of traditional anthropological methods, scholars such as Merry (2005) have performed multi-sited or “deterritorialized” ethnography, following the flow of human rights discourse at global and local levels. [Merry’s (1990) earlier research in legal anthropology had previously paved the way for analyses of discourse as a core vehicle of legal consciousness, again examining both the shape of the language employed and the many social contexts in play.] Hirsch (2006) shows us how we can also find many layers of global semiotics at work within a single court proceeding. Law has proved a fruitful focus for these kinds of inquiries, located as it is at a vital semiotic meeting point between state power and local struggles, between the pull of global norms and capital and the push of people’s everyday understandings and needs. Bowen (2005), for example, has provided an exciting ethnographic account of the many semiotic layers of law and society within which Muslim citizens in Indonesia make sense of their pluralism of values. He takes us from statutory law to individual court cases to village disputes, pointing along the way toward the many spheres and dimensions (including global ones) involved. We find similarly rich ethnographies of local/global legal processes in work by Coutin (2003) on Salvadoran immigrants in the United States, Lazarus-Black (1994) on Antigua and Barbuda, and Maurer (1997) on the British Virgin Islands, among others.

SEMIOTIC ANTHROPOLOGY IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM

As is clear from the cross-currents that cut through the categories above, these five themes converge at many junctures. When

viewed together, they open a vast terrain for anthropological inquiry, as well as pointing to analytic tools that can help us in investigating this terrain. We are in the midst of an exciting time in which many anthropologists are (whether knowing or unknowing) collaborators in the development of a highly productive new synthesis.

One irony that underlies the development of semiotic anthropology as a field is that, despite its focus on communication, the field itself can be quite difficult to understand (Spitulnik 2003 comments briefly on this). Powerful new approaches to examining processes of communication and translation have emerged, but accessible translation of these approaches is frequently hard to come by. And yet, the field is energetically developing an analytical apparatus that can help us to comprehend better how, when, and why people understand or talk past one another. This research could provide a powerful tool for rethinking how the field of semiotic anthropology itself builds barriers to translation and communication—how to struggle, for example, with the often-conflicting goals of precision (which pushes us to develop specialized vocabulary) and accessibility. The effect of audience on text and talk, so thoroughly examined in many settings, is also relevant to how, where, when, and why we attempt to convey our own work.

The question of the limits and possibilities of communication across social boundaries is a pressing issue in current times. Our field has something to say about this question. It would be interesting to see whether we can use our own tools to create more effective translations. For example, the literatures on language socialization and on language contact situations contain a myriad of insights on relevant issues; could we take this one step further and ask how such insights might inform our own practices as scholars attempting to communicate and translate across disciplinary and other divides?

A growing number of anthropologists have explored this issue of translation.

Darnell, for example, has issued a well-aimed call for “a theory of cross-cultural (mis-) communication” (2005, p. 168). Echoing earlier work by Ochs (Keenan 1977), Darnell points to the limits of Grice’s (1975) maxims, limitations that are essentially issues of differences in metapragmatic norms across cultures. Anthropologists who study these issues, she argues, have tools that can help to “enhanc[e] the possibility of dialogue” across sharp social divisions (p. 169). Brenneis (2004) turns the question back on anthropologists themselves as academics, raising concerns about the translation of academic issues into managerialist language. He urges that anthropologists become more reflexively aware of these issues so that they can, where possible, contest the decontextualization and measurement of highly context-dependent, fundamentally incommensurable kinds of knowledge.

And, indeed, one can find many examples of efforts to translate anthropological understandings to other audiences. One of the most difficult aspects would-be translators face is how to use reflexive tools that are frequently employed in the discipline without abandoning important analytic and/or epistemological ground. When anthropologists attempt to point out the positionality of academic observation itself, for example, they place in jeopardy the scientific validity of their findings for a broader audience. And there are a myriad of other double binds confronting translation efforts of this kind (see Mertz 2007 for a description of the difficulties of interdisciplinary translation where U.S. legal language is involved; and Briggs 2003 for an analysis of translation problems in Venezuelan public health initiatives). In an innovative effort, Hirsch (2006) has written an account both from her position as anthropological observer and from her place as a victim, presenting a complex perspective on the legal response to the killing of her husband and others in the U.S. Embassy bombing in Kenya. Hirsch takes seriously the demands of different audiences, rather than assuming

that anthropological understandings can be transparently shifted into public domains (see Silverstein 2003 for an argument that this shift be labeled as a “transformation” rather than as a “translation”).

Here is an arena in which semiotic anthropology has the potential to create yet another important bridge for the fields of linguistic and sociocultural anthropology (as well as other areas of social science)—a bridge between the learning generated about the social and cultural worlds around us by anthropological research, on the one hand, and the public’s understanding of those worlds, on the other hand. Ironically, one strength of the semiotic edge in anthropology is the way it permits us to track double binds built into the way we communicate. This can lead to a sense of despair: Why try to achieve a “better” translation when it seems doomed to fail, by virtue of the systems of communication through which it will have to operate? This way of thinking, however, in turn

rests on a paradoxical imagined purity, as if any communication could move through social realms without alteration. In fact, semiotic anthropology is also a powerful source for an impure model of human communication, in which our messages are always strongly connected to their social contexts. In this sense, anthropological attempts to communicate with various publics are no different than any other effort to communicate. (Although, of course, in a way that we are uniquely situated to explain, every such effort differs from others, to varying degrees and in interesting ways.) Perhaps one of the most difficult tasks ahead, then, is to accept with some humility the fact that we have no special immunity from the processes that we analyze—and to move with appropriate care and reflection into the prosaic, unexalted worlds of indexicality, metapragmatics, ideology, and other impure language-context meeting places in which everyone else on the planet must live (and speak!).

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The author is not aware of any biases that might be perceived as affecting the objectivity of this review. (This statement is, of course, necessarily itself a translation.)

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