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# 7

## Language and culture

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### 7.1 Introduction

LANGUAGE and CULTURE, having 'grown up together', to adapt Benjamin Whorf's (1956: 156) memorable phrase, are inextricably intermeshed. Despite programmatic efforts to define language in such a way as to sever its ties to culture, there is little indication that asocial and acultural theories of language are adequate to the task of providing valid scientific accounts of linguistic form and function (Evans and Levinson 2009). Scientific theories of language necessarily depend on accounts of the language-culture nexus.

While an understanding of the language-culture nexus is theoretically important in its own right, it is especially relevant in the case of endangered languages. In the first place, efforts to support or revitalize endangered languages must confront the fact that language shift takes place for complex social and cultural reasons (Grenoble, Chapter 2). Approaches to language that recognize it to be intimately enmeshed with culture and social practices offer purchase on the contexts of language shift, potentially giving those involved conceptual tools with which to understand the causes of language endangerment, and thereby develop locally apt strategies. In the second place, delimiting the goals of language documentation (Woodbury, Chapter 9) depends on models of the language-culture nexus. Given that the boundary between language and culture is an unclear one (see 7.2.2), and given that language documentation projects must contend with finite time and resources, the definition of what constitutes ADEQUATE DOCUMENTATION of a language depends in part on distinguishing language from the larger field of social practices in which it is embedded. This issue is relevant to all language documentation, but it is especially acute in the case of endangered languages, where opportunities to carry out documentation may be limited.

This chapter provides an overview of important strands of thought regarding the interrelation of language and culture, from the complementary perspectives of culture's influence on linguistic form and the role of linguistic form in social action and culture. We begin with a discussion of the conceptual relationship between the two elements of the dyad on which this chapter focuses.

## 7.2 Conceptual foundations

### 7.2.1 Culture

Although culture has been theorized in a variety of ways, most articulations of the concept share two features:

1. culture is a learned body of behaviours and/or knowledge transmitted by transgenerational learning; and
2. this body is predicated primarily of human groups and, only through membership in a group, of individuals.

The first feature serves to delimit culture by distinguishing it from human characteristics whose transmission can be attributed to genetic or other biological mechanisms (e.g. effects of nutrition), while the second feature seeks to distinguish individually idiosyncratic characteristics from those stemming from long-term group membership. These two features are both present as early as Tylor's 1958[1871] definition of culture:

Culture ... is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. The condition of culture among the various societies of mankind ... is a subject apt for the study of laws of human thought and action.

Tylor's definition also exhibits in incipient form the distinction between *THOUGHT* and *ACTION/BEHAVIOUR* that subsequently developed into a tendency to conceptualize culture as either:

1. primarily related to human cognitive or interpretative activity; or
2. primarily related to behaviour and its material outcomes.

The following brief survey of culture theory reflects this dichotomy, concluding with a discussion of practice theory, an approach which seeks to transcend this *IDEALIST/MATERIALIST* DICHOTOMY.

#### 7.2.1.1 Ideational accounts of culture

Ideational accounts of culture make concepts and meaning central to defining their object, and to explaining its properties and dynamics. The first clearly articulated ideational theories of culture, structuralist

anthropology and ethnoscience/cognitive anthropology, have as their inspirations the versions of structuralist linguistics that developed on either side of the Atlantic. Structuralist anthropology took form with the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss (e.g. 1958), who married the notion of 'collective consciousness' inherited from Emile Durkheim (1912) to a model of cultural meaning inspired by Roman Jakobson's (1978[1942]) theory of phonological features. The result was a vision of culture as a kind of group mind in which sets of binary notional oppositions create collective representations of social life. As an ultimate aim, Lévi-Strauss sought to identify the sociocultural configurations of particular societies as combinations of the basic notional contrasts immanent in the human mind. Though influential in the postwar decades, this semantico-algebraic conception of culture came under increasing critique for its evacuation of action, agency and affect from social life (Bourdieu 1977a, Geertz 1973, Leach 1974).

Culture theory took a similarly ideational turn in North America in the 1950s, as the analysis of lexical meanings came to be seen as a powerful means to apprehend 'native' perspectives. Although the idea that lexical data offered a window onto culture was a central one in Boasian anthropology (see e.g. Sapir 1916: 432), the school of 'componential analysis' developed this idea further by adapting American structuralist notions of phonological contrast to the study of lexical meaning, and crafting feature-based analyses of lexical domains such as kinship terms (Goodenough 1956, Lounsbury 1956). This approach was seen by many as a powerful ethnographic methodology, inspiring the study of **FOLK TAXONOMIES** as a window onto cultural conceptual systems, and eventually leading to the definition of a society's culture as coextensive with the knowledge 'of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members' (Goodenough 1957: 167). Ultimately, debates over the feasibility of bridging the gap between 'native' conceptions and anthropologists' analytical frameworks, along with doubts about the psychological reality of cognitive analyses (Burling 1964, Schneider 1968, Wallace and Atkins 1960) indexed increasing dissatisfaction with cognitivist approaches,<sup>1</sup> and stimulated the development of symbolic, or interpretative, anthropology.

Whereas cognitive anthropologists saw their task as describing cultural knowledge, symbolic anthropologists saw their task as capturing the broader meaningfulness of social actions for the participants in those actions (Geertz 1973: 3-30). The task of the symbolic anthropologist was cast as a hermeneutic one, in which social action was theorized as constituting a form of interpretable 'text' (Turner 1967). Thus, for example, the central role of the white-sapped milk tree in Ndembu female initiation was interpreted as symbolizing the transition of the initiates into the role of child-bearing women. Significantly, cultural texts were understood as public representations, in contrast with the cognitivist focus

on 'knowledge', which symbolic anthropologists argued misconstrued culture as private and individual.

Symbolic anthropology was the last influential ideational account of culture to develop in anthropology, where the culture concept has become increasingly contested. Two critiques have been leveled against the culture concept: one moral, and the other analytical. First, scholars such as Abu-Lughod (1991) have argued that the culture concept makes people into 'others', with a sense of hierarchy and distance invariably accompanying that of difference. In short, these scholars argue that one cannot speak of the culture of a given group without thereby marking that group as alien and inferior. Second, for scholars such as Appadurai (1996) and Rosaldo (1993), the culture concept ignores power relations and individual agency and exaggerates homogeneity by playing down the differences, inequalities, and processes of contestation within groups, thereby blinding analysts to important dimensions of the phenomena they are examining. Defenders of the culture concept, however, have pointed out that neither presuppositions of homogeneity nor entailments of inequality are inherent to the culture concept, and moreover, that no promising alternative exists to take its place (Bashkow 2004, Brumann 1999).

#### 7.2.1.2 Behavioural accounts of culture

In the early twentieth century, the behavioural-ideational divide was frequently manifested in the competing notion of SOCIAL STRUCTURE versus CULTURE. For its advocates, social structure was conceived of as concrete, observable, social and material behaviour, to which the abstract culture concept was unfavourably compared (Radcliffe-Brown 1940). Social anthropologists focused on the types of social structures extant in human groups (e.g. exogamous clans and cross-cousin marriage), and their SOCIAL FUNCTION, which was theorized in a number of ways. One early conception of social function emerged from the work of Bronislaw Malinowski, who identified the FUNCTIONS of social structures as their roles in satisfying basic biophysical human needs. On this view, the family and marriage, for example, functioned to satisfy the biophysical need for reproduction (Malinowski 1939).

A second sense of social function, with roots in Durkheim's (1947[1893]) notion of 'social solidarity', was foregrounded in the work of Alfred Radcliffe-Brown (1935), which focused on the ways in which aspects of social structure contribute to the maintenance of the overarching social structure of which they are part. The British school of STRUCTURAL FUNCTIONALISM made this sense of function central to its analysis of human societies, leading to strong assumptions regarding the stasis of the societies examined, and to analyses of behaviour primarily in terms of their contributions to that stasis (Radcliffe-Brown 1935). Mounting ethnographic evidence, however, revealed that the presupposition of stasis and

the concomitant neglect of history was untenable, significantly undermining the structural-functionalist programme.

### 7.2.1.3 Practice theory

The conceptions of culture discussed so far are characterized by their tendency to either subordinate the behavioural and material aspects of social activity to their ideational ones, or to reverse this relationship. Under these dichotomized views, either ideational schemes are seen as guiding behaviour, which thereby becomes epiphenomenal and relatively uninteresting, or ideational schemes are seen as abstractions from behaviour, and hence considered vague theoretical constructs. PRACTICE THEORY emerged during the 1970s as an effort to transcend this dichotomy, and to address two related weaknesses in social and cultural theory:

1. the tendency to evacuate agency and strategy from analyses of human activity in favour of functional or structural explanations; and
2. the difficulty that both structuralist and functionalist theories had with accounting for and incorporating history and social change.

From the perspective of practice theory, these weaknesses had a common root: inattention to PRACTICAL ACTION.

The key insight of practice theory is that individuals' behaviour displays a combination of strategic improvisation and routinization. Practice theory maintains that individuals are neither structuralist automatons working out the logic of culture, nor functionalist ants working to maintain the societies of which they are part, but are instead strategically savvy actors improvisationally attempting to realize projects of a variety of scales under pressing temporal, social and material constraints (Giddens 1979). At the same time, however, practice theory allows that practical action, while informed by actors' agency, tends to sediment into a body of dispositions, routines, and ready-at-hand schemas for action, which Bourdieu (1977a) calls HABITUS. Crucially, these resources for structuring action are understood to have a dual nature, in that they both inform practical action, and are reproduced and transformed by that action (Giddens 1984). The resulting DUALITY OF STRUCTURE effectively hybridizes the structuralist notion of culture with that of social function, while leaving space for individual agency and human creativity.

### 7.2.2 Distinguishing 'language' and 'culture'

Although the title of this chapter presupposes that the terms LANGUAGE and CULTURE are distinguishable, doing so precisely presents difficulties. Language, like culture, is an intergenerationally transmitted learned behaviour, and many early definitions of culture casually include language as a subcomponent. Indeed, the fact that lay definitions of

language include much that overlaps with culture lies behind the efforts of scholars like Ferdinand de Saussure, Leonard Bloomfield and Noam Chomsky to delimit a restricted object of study for linguistics.

Bloomfield (1926: 154), for example, identified the object of linguistics as the residue that remains after communicative activity has been stripped of everything related to the social ends of communication. Chomsky evinced scepticism that LANGUAGE is a useful scientific concept (Chomsky, 1982: 107), and used the COMPETENCE/PERFORMANCE DISTINCTION to restrict linguistics to the study of those aspects of our communicative ability that are independent of speakers' social goals. As Hanks (1996: 36) points out, these delimitations serve to identify an aspect of communication that cannot be further analysed in terms of its social or interactional function, but must be analysed in terms of organizing principles internal to this domain: grammar (see also Silverstein 1987).

Viewed in this way, the understanding of language and culture that emerges is not one in which language and culture constitute distinct and bounded systems, but rather one in which it is possible to identify, within the larger systems of social practices of a society, a pole of linguistic form and grammatical organization that constitutes part of a broader set of motivating factors, resources and constraints that inform social action. Linguistics' disciplinary focus thus highlights those aspects of social practice located close to the pole of formal organization identified by Saussure and Bloomfield. From this perspective, the study of language and culture involves a focus on those aspects of social practices in which linguistic form and social action play important mutually constitutive roles, especially those that by virtue of their variability across human groups are seen as cultural in nature.

### 7.3 Approaches to the language–culture nexus

Whereas the study of linguistic form can be surveyed either from the perspective of organizational components (e.g. phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics) or in terms of identifiable theories (e.g. generativist, functionalist or cognitivist), the study of the language–culture nexus defies comprehensive exposition based on such rubrics. Rather, efforts to describe work on the language–culture nexus must confront a heterogeneous mixture of theoretical frameworks and relatively diffuse schools of thought, and perduring questions that cross-cut theories and intellectual traditions.

Among the schools of thought on the language–culture nexus, the UCLA, Chicago, and MPI Nijmegen schools are currently the most influential.<sup>2</sup> The UCLA school, exemplified by the work of Alessandro Duranti and Elinor Ochs, exhibits a strong ethnographic commitment that can be traced to its roots in the ethnography of communication

tradition (see 7.3.1.1 below), which is reflected in a pervasive skepticism toward universalist accounts of linguo-cultural phenomena. As evident in Duranti's (1997) subdiscipline-defining textbook, this school draws on Vygotskian psychology and continental philosophical thought (e.g. Wittgenstein, Husserl), and on the tradition stemming from Erving Goffman's ethnomethodological approaches to interaction, including its discourse-focused offshoot, conversational analysis (Goodwin and Heritage 1990).

The Chicago school's approach to the language-culture nexus, exemplified by the work of Michael Silverstein, is characterized by the prominent role of semiotic theory (see 7.3.1.4) in providing much of the tradition's ontological apparatus (Agha 2007a), which is combined with accounts of linguistic reflexivity (Lucy 1993) and language ideology (see 7.3.2.4) in order to couple basic semiotic elements and relations to larger scale social and cultural processes.

The MPI Nijmegen school,<sup>3</sup> exemplified by the work of Stephen Levinson and Nick Enfield, among others, contrasts with the previous two schools in a number of ways, including a strong theoretical focus on cognition, the use of experimental and stimuli-based methodologies, systematic cross-linguistic comparison and, despite a sensitivity to cultural variation, an underlying commitment to explanatory frameworks in which universal principles and mechanisms play a major role (e.g. Enfield and Stivers 2007, Levinson and Meira 2003).

### **7.3.1 Frameworks**

#### **7.3.1.1 Ethnography of communication**

The *ETHNOGRAPHY OF COMMUNICATION* (EoC) was the earliest effort to develop a framework for the description of linguistic behaviour in wider social and cultural contexts. Hymes (1964) observed that linguistics' focus on linguistic form, and the general lack of sensitivity to language in cultural anthropology, led to inattention to the integration of language into social life in both disciplines. In response, EoC was aimed at developing culturally contextualized descriptions of language use that embraced holism at both the level of the community and at the level of recurrent communicative contexts, or *SPEECH EVENTS*.

At the community level, the goal of EoC was to characterize the *VERBAL REPERTOIRE* of communities and describe the circumstances under which the languages, registers and styles (Hymes, 1974b) comprising the repertoire were employed. In his study of interaction in the Indian community of Khalapur, for example, Gumperz (1964) characterizes the verbal repertoire of the former community as consisting of standard Hindi, the two major varieties of the Khalapur dialect, and three subdialects associated with the untouchable caste, and discusses how the distribution of the two major varieties depends on the



formality of the speech context and social asymmetries between the participants.

At the level of the speech event, the goal was to holistically describe its social organization and the various WAYS OF SPEAKING involved in the event (see e.g. Sherzer 1983). To guide this task, Hymes (1972) developed the SPEAKING framework, which identified the following important descriptive dimensions: SITUATION (both the spatio-temporal setting and the socioculturally defined situation type), PARTICIPANTS (the actors and non-actors in the speech event), ENDS (goals and outcomes), ACT SEQUENCES, KEY (social valence: e.g. serious versus comic), INSTRUMENTALITIES (linguistic varieties and channels), NORMS (of interaction and interpretation), and GENRES. One of the most detailed descriptions resulting from this tradition is Duranti's (1981) work on the *fono*, a political gathering of Samoan chiefs and orators. This description ranges from an enumeration of eligible participants, their rank-based seating within the social space of the meeting house, the resulting division of the space into regions for formal and informal communication, and the sequential organization of the event into an opening *kava* drinking ceremony and a main speaking event. The description of the latter event is further decomposed into:

1. the specialized lexicon employed in the event, including 'respect vocabulary' (i.e. honorific) forms;
2. morphosyntactic characteristics of *fono* speech, which include a greater prevalence than in everyday conversation of grammatical elements such as overt NPs and tense-aspect markers; and
3. turn-taking organization, which varies from prototypical conversational organization (Sacks *et al.* 1974) during the informal stages of the *fono*, to a quasi-templatic structure which highly constrains the content, form and sequencing of turns at talk during the later formal stages.

The EoC came under criticism for its relatively atheoretical character (Levinson 1983: 375), which together with the vastness of the empirical task it set itself (Keating 2001: 294), and its relative isolation from mainstream anthropological concerns (Duranti 2003: 328), accounts for its decline as an active area of research in recent decades. Interestingly, EoC's descriptivist orientation (see e.g. Hymes, 1977: 53, Saville-Troike, 1982: 108) has led to a recent resurgence of interest in EoC among linguists as a holistic framework for comprehensive language documentation (Hill 2006, Himmelmann 1998, A. Woodbury 2003).

### 7.3.1.2 Language socialization

The field of LANGUAGE SOCIALIZATION (LS) arose in part as a developmental counterpart to the ethnography of communication and the pragmatics of the era (Ochs and Schieffelin 1979), but this 'socio-cultural

framework for language acquisition' (Ochs 1988: 4) quickly outgrew its origins (Schieffelin and Ochs 1986), drawing inspiration from Piagetian and Vygotskian psychology (Piaget 1952; Vygotsky 1962, 1978) and practice theory. The two central ideas of LS were (Ochs 1988: 14–17):

1. that knowledge of language and knowledge of culture are acquired simultaneously through social activity, so that linguistic knowledge is embedded in knowledge of appropriate language use in social context; and
2. that both linguistic and cultural skills are acquired via a process of 'internalization' in which novices first develop the ability to participate in joint activities with more expert individuals and then subsequently develop the ability to deploy these skills without this social scaffolding.

The vision of the language-culture nexus that emerges is thus one of integration of grammar, pragmatics and social action through their simultaneous and intermeshed childhood acquisition in joint activity.

An example of this process is provided by Schieffelin's (1986) discussion of the acquisition of rhetorical questions as a social control strategy among Kaluli children. Schieffelin describes how preverbal children experience the combination of rhetorical questions with direct interventions by caretakers to alter undesirable behaviours (e.g. 'Why are you climbing?', combined with the removal of the baby off of a woodpile). Later, verbally capable children are also included in triadic interactions in which caretakers model rhetorical questions for them to repeat to others as a way of modifying their undesirable behaviours (e.g. '"Why are you crying?!" Say like that'). In this way, Kaluli children learn to interpret and use rhetorical questions as part of social control strategies, resulting in the holistic acquisition of intermeshed linguistic and social skills.

### 7.3.1.3 Pragmatics and ethnopragmatics

PRAGMATICS occupies an ambiguous position in the culturally informed study of language. Since pragmatics concerns linguistic meanings that arise in concrete contexts of language use, it can be seen as concerned with aspects of hybrid linguo-social phenomena lying closer to the pole of social action than to that of linguistic form. However, pragmatics is mainly concerned with universal aspects of context-dependent meaning, which arguably places this UNIVERSAL PRAGMATICS outside the realm of culture (Goddard 2006b).

ETHNOPRAGMATICS arose as a response to this acultural pragmatics, first emerging as a relativist critique of early Gricean pragmatics and Searlean speech act theory (e.g. Rosaldo 1982; Wierzbicka 1985), and subsequently developing into culturally informed accounts of pragmatics in different societies (e.g. Duranti 1993, Goddard 2006a; Wierzbicka

1991). Keenan (1976), an early example of the critical phase of this tradition, observed that vague and circumlocutory talk is common in conversational interactions among speakers of Malagasy, which appears to contradict the Gricean maxim that speakers 'be informative'. Keenan argues that the vagueness found in much Malagasy discourse stems from the desire of speakers to avoid epistemic commitments that entail social risks, and that the degree of informativeness that speakers exhibit depends on the sensitivity of the subject matter and their relation to the addressee. Keenan concludes that the norms governing communicative society must be calibrated to the society in question, and that serious thought needs to be given to the dependence of pragmatic reasoning on culture-specific situational parameters.

Although the term ethnopragmatics was first employed by Duranti (1993, 1994), it has come to be most closely associated with the tradition springing from Wierzbicka's (1991) *CROSS-CULTURAL PRAGMATICS*, rechristened *ETHNOPRAGMATICS* by Goddard (2002). This latter formulation of ethnopragmatics is clearly distinguished by its reliance on Wierzbicka's Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM), a set of approximately sixty supposedly cross-culturally valid conceptual primes, and the use of *CULTURAL SCRIPTS*, which are explicit schematized articulations of cultural values and reasoning in terms of NSM that speakers are said to employ in formulating and interpreting utterances.

Debate continues between ethnopragmaticists and proponents of a more universalizing vision of pragmatics, centring mainly on the issue of whether the principles of (neo-)Gricean and Searlean pragmatics are ethnocentric, and whether this entails the need for a distinct ethnopragmatics (Goddard 2006b). As the exchange between Enfield (2007) and Goddard (2007) illustrates, the core issue in this debate is whether a cross-culturally valid approach to pragmatic phenomena requires a set of universal inferencing strategies that combine with culture-specific pragmatic principles and schemas, or whether pragmatics is culture-specific 'all the way down'.

#### 7.3.1.4 Semiotic approaches to language

One of the major challenges to studying the culture-language nexus is identifying and theorizing substantive linkages between communicative contexts and linguistic form and meaning. *SEMIO TIC* approaches to language address this challenge by focusing on *INDEXICALITY*, a type of meaning which is fixed by reference to variables that emerge from schematic parameterizations of utterance context, as exemplified by the canonical spatial indexical expressions 'here' and 'now'. Jakobson (1971) first brought indexicality to linguists' attention with his work on tense, and Silverstein (1976, 2003) subsequently developed a broadly gauged account of indexical contextual meanings that went beyond spatio-temporal ones to encompass social meaning.

The utility of indexicality for linking linguistic forms to social organization is nicely illustrated by deference indexicals, such as T/V PRONOUNS (labelled for the contrast found in many European languages in the second-person singular pronouns between familiar T (as in French *tu*) and formal V (French *vous*)) and HONORIFICS (Agha, 1994). The Japanese honorific system, for example, exhibits a 'polite' verbal suffix *-mas* that is stereotypically used to address social superiors (Foley, 1997: 318–23). The presence or absence of this suffix thus produces a contrast reminiscent of European T/V systems, where the choice of linguistic form indexes (i.e. points to) the relative social positions of speech act participants in a local social hierarchy. In addition to addressee honorifics, the Japanese system exhibits reference honorifics, which stereotypically index the relative social status of a referent and the speaker, while other languages, such as Pohnpeian, also exhibit bystander honorifics (Keating 1998). While social indexicals can be seen as REFLECTING social facts by virtue of their context-presupposing properties, indexicals also play an important role in SHAPING social relations via the CREATIVE effects of presuppositional accommodation, which allow speakers to use deference indexicals to express social meanings that cannot be simply 'read off' of context.

Indexical approaches to language have yielded another important framework for understanding the social importance of language, that of INDEXICAL ORDERS (Silverstein 2003), which in essence provides an account of the diachronic development of social indexicality. The basic idea is straightforward: a first-order indexicality correlates particular linguistic characteristics (e.g. so-called Received Pronunciation (RP, see Agha 2007a) with a particular delimitable social group. A second-order indexicality can then develop, linking those linguistic characteristics with salient, ideologically mediated, characteristics of that group (e.g. a particular cultural sophistication). In this way, particular linguistic forms can become SOCIOLINGUISTIC MARKERS (Labov 1972) identifying individuals as members of particular social groups, with particular socially salient characteristics.

### 7.3.1.5 Communicative practice theory

PRACTICE-BASED approaches to communication take advantage of the integration of structure, agency and historicity achieved by practice theory to develop an approach to communication that moves beyond the static structuralism of most grammatical theories to embrace the strategic and temporal dimensions of language use, without abandoning notions of regularity and conventionalization. From the perspective of communicative practice theory, speakers' communicative activity is guided by their communicative habitus, i.e. their disposition to communicate in particular ways (in a manner consonant with Hymes' (1977) COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE), which is calibrated to particular social

contexts via pervasive cultural ideologies and speakers' own interactional goals (Erickson 2004, Hanks 1987, 1996). On this view, grammar is one of a number of resources that speakers employ in their regularized (but not mechanically rule-governed) communicative actions, which form part of broader trajectories of goal-directed social action.

This approach to integrating grammar and social action is exemplified in Michael's (to appear) examination of how speakers of Nanti employ EVIDENTIALS in interaction. Grammaticalized evidentials (markers that indicate the sensory or cognitive modes of access that speakers have to the states of affairs expressed by their utterances, e.g. visual versus inference) are pervasive in Nanti discourse, but are not grammatically obligatory, so that Nantis' use of these grammatical resources is not predictable on structural grounds alone. However, Nantis' use of evidentials exhibits considerable regularity, which can be explained in terms of interactants' social goals and Nanti ideologies regarding moral responsibility. In particular, much of Nantis' deployment of evidentials stems from strategic efforts to distance themselves from particular events or individuals, by relying on implicatures of non-involvement generated by non-direct evidentials such as reportives and inferentials. Thus, while grammar alone significantly under-determines the distribution of evidentials in Nanti discourse, an account of Nanti communicative habitus, which incorporates relevant cultural ideologies and regularized social strategies, provides an understanding of their appearance in Nanti discourse.

An emerging area of research related to communicative practice theory involves the recognition that the basic insights of practice theory intersect significantly with those of grammaticalization theory (Bybee and Hopper 2001: 2, Evans 2003). Both theories are concerned with how structures both guide behaviour (without mechanically determining it) and emerge as the sedimentation of behaviour. Both frameworks are thus accounts of the regularization and conventionalization of behaviour that leave space for both agency and 'invisible hand' effects. This common ground between communicative practice theory and grammaticalization theory suggests a theory of cultural influence on linguistic form in which discourse plays a major mediating function. Specifically, cultural factors involved in the linguistic habitus influence the frequency of particular linguistic forms in discourse, which leads to increased grammaticalization of those forms.

An example of this process is given by the KINTAX (kinship syntax) constructions of numerous Australian Aboriginal languages: pieces of morphology or lexical alternations that indicate whether distinct human referents in a clause pertain to 'harmonic' generations (ego's generation  $\pm 2n$ ,  $n = 0, 1, 2, \dots$ ) or disharmonic ones (ego's generation  $\pm (2n + 1)$ ) (Evans 2003: 23-7; Hale 1966). In his discussion of the Martuthunira harmonic verb suffix, for example, Dench (1987) argues that the kintactic sense developed from a collective/reciprocal suffix

(still present in the language) was driven by the high-frequency use of reciprocals in descriptions of habitual cooperation among harmonic generation kin in community ceremonies. The Martuthunira example illustrates how cultural practices (cooperation among harmonic kin) can lead to increased frequency of particular linguistic forms (the use of reciprocals with reference to harmonic kin), yielding culturally driven grammaticalization.

### 7.3.2 Areas of inquiry

#### 7.3.2.1 Culture-specific meaning and categorization:

##### Ethnosemantics and Ethnosyntax

One of the principal ways in which CULTURE has been invoked in linguistics is in describing and accounting for meanings and semantic categorizations that vary considerably from language to language. The earliest culturally relativized approaches to meaning were the ethnosemantics and ethnoscience approaches of the 1960s and 1970s (see Section 7.2.1.1), which influenced the subsequent development of cognitive anthropology (D'Andrade 1995) and cognitive linguistics (Langacker 1987). These two fields have converged on a form of culturally informed semantics that has moved beyond the binary feature-based account of ethnosemantics, making use of notions of PROTOTYPICALITY and gradient membership (Rosch 1975) to address the vagueness and ambiguities characteristic of much natural language. Work on RADIAL CATEGORIES (categories defined by multiple criteria, none of which need be either logically necessary or sufficient for category membership by themselves), IMAGE SCHEMAS and the role of METAPHOR in categorial organization, have been especially influential (Lakoff 1987, Palmer 1996).

Lakoff's (1987: 92–102) discussion of Dyirbal noun classes (based on Dixon 1972) illustrates these cognitive approaches to categorization. Dyirbal exhibits four major noun classes: *bayi* (men, most animals, the moon), *balan* (women, fire, sun, most birds, stinging or dangerous animals), *balam* (edible plants, honey, cigarettes) and *bala* (a residual category). Membership in these categories illustrates the effects of:

1. GRADIENCE, e.g. tobacco is not as prototypical a 'food' as edible plants and honey, but it is a consumable, and hence falls in the *balam* radial category;
2. CHAINING, e.g. the hairy mary grub produces a sunburn-like sting, and thus falls in *balan*, with the sun; and
3. IDEALIZED MODELS, e.g. according to myths, the moon and sun are husband and wife, and so the moon falls with men in *bayi* and the sun with women in *balan*.

As Lakoff observes, although radial category effects are found across languages, the organization of categories in particular languages depends

crucially on local understandings of similarity, and on culturally salient relationships between entities.

Another important approach to culturalized semantics focuses on lexical meanings as reflective of cultural concerns, especially with respect to the environment and culture-specific material practices (e.g. Sapir 1916). More recently, scholars such as Wierzbicka (1997) have argued that lexical items in a given society also reflect aspects of its ethos or regnant philosophies (see also Jocks 1998: 224–5). Wierzbicka goes further, arguing that languages exhibit KEY WORDS that give special insight into their associated cultures. She argues, for example, that the comparison of the roughly equivalent words for 'freedom' in English (*freedom*) and Russian (*svoboda*) reveals different understandings of an individual's option to act in the face of opposing pressures, and suggests that *svoboda* 'embodies a different perspective on human life' in its association with ease and well-being, a connotation absent from its English counterpart (Wierzbicka 1997: 139–40).

Attention to culturally grounded aspects of meaning have extended from the lexicon to morphosyntax. Work in the latter area has begun to crystallize under the rubric of ETHNOSYNTAX (Enfield 2002a, Wierzbicka 1979, 1992). Enfield (2002b) synthesizes several lines of thought regarding relationships between morphosyntax and culture, and lays out the empirical and analytical challenges inherent to this area of study (especially the dangers of circularity in relating linguistic form to cultural factors). Work in ethnosyntax draws on frameworks as diverse as ethnopragmatics (Goddard 2002), cognitive approaches to metaphor and metonymy (Langacker 2002) and grammaticalization theory.

An example of the latter is given by Burrige's (2002) examination of highly unusual degrammaticalization trajectories of modal verbs in the Pennsylvania German of Canadian Anabaptist communities. Burrige (2002: 221) notes, for example, that the common desiderative construction in this variety makes use of the main verb *wotte*, which has degrammaticalized from the former auxiliary verb *wollte*, the 'subjunctive of modest wish'. Burrige argues that this unusual trajectory can be understood as a consequence of Anabaptist cultural norms that prize humility and the subordination of self-will to God. She suggests that originally, 'wotte [as a subjunctive auxiliary] was used as a cautious and modest substitute for the indicative in utterances expressing a sense of "wishing"' (Burrige 2002: 221), but that due to its high frequency in desiderative contexts, it came to be 'stripped of its pragmatic component ... [becoming] reinterpreted as a lexical verb with the full sense of "wishing"' (Burrige 2002: 222).

### 7.3.2.2 Linguistic relativity

The question of culturally grounded meaning discussed in the previous section has strong ties with the topic of LINGUISTIC RELATIVITY. Since at

least the nineteenth century (e.g. Humboldt 1988[1836]), scholars have speculated that language structure influences patterns of thought and perception. Modern work in this area stems from the Boasian emphasis on cultural diversity in the categorization of experience (Lucy 1992: 11–13), which was later coupled, in the work of Edward Sapir, to the notion that language plays a role in determining that experience (Sapir 1964[1931]). Benjamin Whorf extended Sapir's thinking in this area by going beyond Sapir's concern with overtly marked categories to include covert categories, including what are now called subcategorization classes. Whorf (1956: 221) further emphasized the unconscious nature of the linguistic influence on thought, and in turn, culture, concluding that:

users of markedly different grammars are pointed by their grammars towards different types of observations and different evaluations of externally similar acts of observation, and hence are not equivalent as observers but must arrive at somewhat different views of the world.

As Lucy (1992: 41) observes, the SAPIR-WHORF HYPOTHESIS, as it came to be known, spawned considerable debate from the 1950s to the 1980s, but little substantive research. What little research was carried out either failed to properly distinguish linguistic structure and non-linguistic behaviour, leading to circularity (e.g. Lee 1944), or suffered from oversimplified analyses of the linguistic domain (e.g. Brown and Lenneberg 1954). Only in the 1980s did methodologically sophisticated work begin to be carried out. Lucy (1992), for example, examined the effect of grammaticalized classifier systems in languages on speakers' categorization practices. Lucy reasoned that in classifier languages like Yucatec, most referents are treated as 'measured' units of a substance (e.g. a sheet of paper may be morphologically expressed as a 'flexible 2-dimensional unit of paper-substance'), making 'substance' more ontologically salient than 'units' for Yucatec speakers. Lucy predicted that for this reason, Yucatec speakers would judge objects of the same substance, but different shapes, to be more alike than objects of the same shape but different substances, while predicting the exact opposite for English speakers, due to the lack of a grammaticalized classifier system in English. Experimental results confirmed Lucy's predictions.

In recent years, linguistic relativity has attracted the attention of psychologists as well (Gentner and Meadows 2003), who have shown that linguistic encoding serves to prime performance of certain cognitive tasks (Boroditsky 2001) and leads to increased similarity judgements for referents that share noun class features, such as gender (Boroditsky *et al.* 2003).

Another major strand of work in this area is animated by efforts to show that categorization in particular semantic domains shows systematic similarities despite cross-cultural variation. Although there has been



significant work in this area with respect to kinship (e.g. Goodenough 1970) and ethnobiological terminology (e.g. Berlin 1992; cf. Hunn 1982), the greatest attention has been paid to colour terminology (Berlin and Kay, 1969). Although languages vary from having as few as two basic colour terms, as in the case of the Papuan language Dani, to as many as twelve, as in Russian, there is remarkably little variation among colour term systems of a given size in terms of the focal colours of each colour term, as determined by the use of a common set of stimuli. This fact appears to stem from the physiological characteristics of the retinal cells responsible for colour vision, which make particular colours especially perceptually salient (Kay and McDaniel 1978). A considerable critical literature has developed from this early work, challenging both its theoretical presuppositions, in particular, its ethnocentric definition of 'colour' (Lucy 1997), and aspects of its empirical validity (e.g. Levinson 2000). Recent work seeks to synthesize the strengths of both camps by showing that there is a combination of both universal tendencies and local linguistic convention in the emergence of language-specific colour categories (Regier *et al.* 2010).

### 7.3.2.3 Language ideologies

The frameworks and themes discussed to this point are not specifically concerned with aspects of the language-culture nexus of which speakers have conscious awareness. The study of LANGUAGE IDEOLOGY, in contrast, focuses on language as the conscious object of social action and culture. Although linguists have long noted (with varying degrees of seriousness and interest) speakers' explicit evaluative orientation to language in terms of LANGUAGE ATTITUDES OR FOLK-THEORIES OF LANGUAGE (e.g. Bloomfield 1933: 22, cited in Woolard 1998: 11), substantial attention to this aspect of the language-culture nexus is a relatively recent phenomenon (Kroskrity 2000, Rumsey 1990, Schieffelin *et al.* 1998, Silverstein 1979). The use of IDEOLOGY in demarcating this area of study, instead of the more neutral term ATTITUDE, signals the premise within this framework that the evaluations and theories that form its objects of study are mainly thought to be contested ones implicated in webs of power relations, and are held by interested, socially situated groups.

One of the most studied language ideological complexes involves the association of 'nations' with human groups delimitable by their use of a (sufficiently) common language, a notion whose first clear articulation is attributed to Johann Gottfried Herder (Koepke 1990). Still very much relevant in present-day Europe, as evident in the role of language in the post-Soviet fragmentation of the former Warsaw block (Blommaert and Verschueren 1998), the Herderian equation of a single nation with a people speaking a single language was also exported around the world in the colonial period, as evident in the US English Only movement (González and Melis 2001), and the widespread suppression by nation

states of minority languages around the world, a major factor, of course, in language endangerment (Dorian 1998).

#### 7.4 Cultural consequences of language shift

The view that language loss has significant cultural consequences is a widely held one among both linguists (e.g. Dorian 1999: 31-3, Hale 1992: 6, Nettle and Romaine 2000) and speakers of endangered languages (e.g. Czaykowska-Higgins 2009: 32-3; Hinton 2002: 152-4). The cultural consequences of language loss have been theorized in a number of ways, and the empirical focus of work in this area varies from concerns with lexically expressed CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE, to the dependence of communicative functions on linguistic form, to critically oriented engagement with language ideologies.

Recent publications on language endangerment aimed at popular audiences implicate the shift from local languages to global ones in significant losses of cultural knowledge, especially detailed knowledge of local environments and resource use (e.g. Nettle and Romaine 2000: 50-77, *passim*). Harrison (2007: 24-7), for example, discusses the finely grained lexical distinctions drawn by speakers of Tofa in semantic domains such as types of reindeer, which are classified in terms of sex, age, and, if male, whether they are gelded. Harrison argues that the shift in Tofa communities to Russian has blocked the transmission of this kind of local knowledge, remarking 'we might even go a step further that the knowledge Marta [a speaker of Tofa] possesses *cannot* be expressed in an intact or efficient way in Russian' [emphasis in original] (Harrison 2007: 24). Under this view then, language shift *per se* plays a causal role in disrupting the transmission of cultural knowledge (Harrison 2007: 53).

Despite the centrality of claims like these to public discourses on language endangerment and shift, there is surprisingly little research that directly addresses them.<sup>4</sup> For example, while there is ample documentation of language loss being *associated* with the loss of specialized cultural knowledge, it is not entirely clear that the loss of such knowledge is a *consequence* of language loss, as opposed to being a simultaneous casualty of large-scale sociopolitical processes that devalue and erode entire life-spheres of indigenous and minority groups around the world (Rice 2007: 319). It remains an open question if loss of cultural knowledge, for example, the ability to identify plant and animal species, occurs even in contexts of language shift where the cultural knowledge in question retains its status, value and utility (however, see discussion of Hill 2001 below).

Whereas work linking cultural knowledge and the lexicon has strong resonances with ethnosemantics and ethnoscience, another strand of thinking regarding the cultural consequences of language shift has ties

to construals of Whorfianism that see languages as embodying WORLD-VIEWS. Discussing the Hawaiian system of alienable and inalienable possession, for example, Nettle and Romaine (2000: 65) remark:

One could argue that the distinctive system of Polynesian possessive marking is the backbone of the language. If this distinction disappears ... the language becomes but a shadow of its former self, and so does the traditional culture and worldview it encoded.

There are reasons to doubt that broad appeals to worldview in contexts of language shift are justified (Silverstein 1998a: 422), but as Harrison (2007: 185) points out, if subtler understandings of the relationship between language structure and habitual thought are essentially correct (see Section 7.3.2.2), then there should be empirically detectable cognitive consequences of language shift and loss.

A related line of research approaches the question of the impact of language shift on culture by considering what Woodbury (1998) calls *FORM DEPENDENT EXPRESSION* (aspects of language use and meaning that are particularly dependent on linguistic form as such). As Hale (1998: 204) observed, there are types of communicative activity that depend so crucially on linguistic form, metrical poetry, for example, that translation, though possible to some degree at the level of referential function, fails at other levels of communicative function.

Woodbury (1998) explores this issue by examining the expression of affect by Alaskan Cup'iks when they speak English. Woodbury allows that there are rough notional equivalences between Cup'ik affective suffixes and English affect words (e.g. 'poor Joe'), but argues that such equivalences do not support the use of English affect words in a way that parallels the use of affective suffixes in everyday Cup'ik discourse. Woodbury argues that because Cup'ik affective suffixes form part of morphological paradigms, they are less discursively salient than their English counterparts and, as such, afford considerably more frequent use. The fact that affective meanings are expressed by free words in English makes them objects of metalinguistic awareness in a way Cup'ik affective suffixes are not, rendering anomalous the pervasive expression of affect in English. Despite a certain notional equivalence between Cup'ik and English, therefore, the difference in the formal realization of these meanings entails the shift from Cup'ik to English resulted in the bleaching of affect from the discourse of ethnic Cup'iks.

Hill (2001) provides a complementary perspective on form dependence in a discussion of lexical contraction among speakers of Tohono O'odham (TO), suggesting that plant and animal names have not only denotative functions, but constitute crucial links in an embodied system of knowledge and affect, so that 'as words are lost, knowledge fades as well, even when there is no concomitant cultural or environmental change' [emphasis mine]. Hill notes, for example, that in interviews with TO speakers, uses

of TO ethnobiological terms often evoked strong affective responses (e.g. disgust at rattlesnakes) and the recounting of associated cultural knowledge, while their English lexical counterparts rarely did (Hill 2001: 164), suggesting that although the TO and English terms may be denotationally equivalent, they play different cognitive roles for these speakers in relation to TO culture.

Regardless of how language shift affects culture-specific systems of knowledge, affect and expression, however, there can be no doubt that language and its relationship to culture and identity often become the objects of powerful language ideologies in contexts of language shift. The tendency for individuals to identify sociocultural groupings and their own identity by language use is sufficiently pervasive both cross-culturally (Fishman 1999: 449) and historically (Haarmann 1999: 63-6), that the contraction or cessation of use of a language often poses an ideological predicament for group identity (see e.g. McCarty and Zepeda 1999: 207-8, Dobrin and Berson, Chapter 10):

If the Kaqchikel language is dying, it is the Kaqchikel people who are dying with its own Kaqchikel Maya identity. (COCADI, 1985: 12, cited in Fishman, 1997: 240)

The sense of crisis may be especially acute in cases where a given group associates its language with cherished cultural ideals, which is widespread among human groups (Fishman 1997). However, arguments are also made by members of affected groups for the resilience of sociocultural identity under circumstances of language shift. For example, Jocks (1998: 230), an ethnically Mohawk scholar, comments:

In traditional circles one frequently hears the assertion that language and culture are inextricably linked, and that loss of an Indigenous language prefigures loss of distinct culture and identity. But one also hears the opposite assertion: that Native people can and do live traditional lives without speaking or understanding their traditional languages. I agree ... [I]n places where a sizable number of English-speaking people are nonetheless determined to forge some kind of traditional identity, a body of traditional discourse in English can arise that is related - though not identical - to discourse in the original, traditional language.

These apparently disparate views on the cultural consequences of language loss are reconcilable from the perspective on the language-culture nexus presented in Section 7.2.2, which holds that linguistic form is enmeshed with non-linguistic social practices to varying degrees in different areas of communicative practice. If in discussing language loss we restrict ourselves to a relatively circumscribed view of language, centring on grammar, it is clear that there are significant aspects of culture and identity that are capable of surviving shifts in linguistic

code, as Jocks suggests. At the same time, however, it is evident that some forms of cultural expression and cognition are tied to the use of specific linguistic resources, and that loss of these resources leaves a gap in social practices and knowledge. The more inclusive our delimitation of language becomes, encompassing communicative practices as well as linguistic code, however, the more closely culture loss becomes tied to language loss.

## 7.5 Conclusion

Language endangerment raises similar questions for both the communities whose histories are tied to the use of languages undergoing shift and for the linguists who work with these communities (these groups are increasingly overlapping): what can and should be done in the face of language shift? An understanding of the intertwined nature of language and culture has implications both for courses of action intended to affect processes of language shift and for the more narrowly linguistic tasks of language documentation, description and analysis. In the former case, it points to the importance of recognizing that language, narrowly construed, is intermeshed with broader sets of social practices, and that language maintenance or revitalization is not simply a question of revitalizing a linguistic code. It suggests, to the contrary, that for language revitalization or maintenance to be successful, it must engage with the factors leading to the erosion of whole cultural spheres.

For linguistic work on endangered languages, the recognition that grammar is inextricably embedded in culture raises difficult issues regarding documentary and descriptive adequacy. As linguistic form and social practices are not neatly separable, delimiting the goals of language documentation, defined as concerned with 'observable linguistic behaviour' (Himmelman 2008: 346), necessarily involves a theory of the language-culture nexus (however naive or sophisticated it may be). As described in Section 7.3.1.1, theorists of documentary linguistics have been attracted to the speech event framework of the ethnography of communication as a rubric for documenting the language-culture nexus, but many aspects of language use that are important areas of language documentation (e.g. pragmatics) do not clearly align with speech events as such. Despite issues of this sort, however, language documentation and scholarship on the language-culture nexus both stand to benefit from addressing the pressing question of what constitutes adequate documentation and description of communicative practices; the former field from the theoretical sophistication of the latter, and the latter from the resulting increased prominence of the social dimension of language within linguistics.

## Notes

- 1 Although the appeal of cognitivist accounts of culture has waned in anthropology in recent decades, they have attracted considerable interest outside anthropology. Evolutionary psychology and related approaches in cognitive science and philosophy have advanced 'epidemiological' theories of culture which centre on the transmission and evolutionary selection of mental representations (Dennett 1991, Sperber 1996), in some cases articulating these accounts using Richard Dawkins' (1976) concept of the *MEME*, an isolable unit of socially learned knowledge (Durham 1991). Thus far such approaches have had relatively little positive impact in either anthropology or linguistics, although a critical literature has emerged in the former discipline (e.g. Harris 1999).
- 2 By choosing to name these 'schools of thought' after specific institutions I do not mean to suggest that practitioners in these schools are confined to these institutions (quite the opposite is true), or that these are the only institutions of importance insofar as scholarship on the language-culture nexus is concerned (far from it).
- 3 That is, the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, located in Nijmegen, the Netherlands.
- 4 As Himmelmann (2008: 343-4) and Errington (2003: 724) observe, linguists writing about the consequences of language shift face the challenge of writing to diverse audiences. One way to evaluate claims regarding the causal role of language shift in the loss of cultural knowledge may be as strategies, often linked to arguments about the universal utility of such knowledge (e.g. Nettle and Romaine 2000: 15-16, 69-77 *passim*; cf. J. Hill 2002, Muehlmann 2005), for recruiting public support for endangered-language maintenance, revitalization and documentation, and not as scientific or scholarly arguments.