The Routledge Handbook of Linguistic Anthropology

Nancy Bonvillain

Introduction

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Bruce Mannheim
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As a research tradition, linguistic anthropology emerged in the United States and Canada under the aegis of Boasian “four-field” anthropology. The name itself predates Boas, and was used for the collection of texts and other linguistic materials among Native North Americans (Gal 2006: 171), but within the Boasian program, carried through by such anthropologists as Sapir, Reichard, Haas, and Voegelin, it came to denote a set of research practices in which language in all its aspects provided an opening into culture, social relations, history, and prehistory. Though located intellectually and institutionally within the field of anthropology, it draws on several intertwined traditions of anthropological and linguistic research, North American and European, beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century. These traditions can be characterized by six intellectual revolutions, each of which reshaped the way we understand language and its social, cultural, and historical reach. These are 1) the discovery of time and of regularity in change; 2) the discovery of structure; 3) the cognitive revolution; 4) understanding language as fully socially embedded; 5) language as a transindividual, interactional phenomenon; 6) a population (or populace) centered view of language. While each of these intellectual movements took place at a specific moment in time, in no sense did they supplant earlier movements; rather, the insights that have come with each transformation have been incorporated into succeeding ones.

The Discovery of Time and of Regularity in Change (Linguistics)

In the middle of the nineteenth century the study of language primarily involved the study of written texts from the past as cultural documents of the time in which they were composed, drawing especially on the classical languages of the Eurasian continents: Latin, Greek, Arabic, Sanskrit, Old Persian, and older texts in Tamil, Chinese, and Japanese. One of the major concerns of these scholars, known as philologists, was identifying relationships among texts, both in a single line of development and through contact with each other. Philologists were especially interested in word histories, but approached them in atomistic ways, without identifying systematic patterns of change from one historically attested stage of a language to another. It was not until the first of the revolutions – often dated to 1876 (Hoenigswald 1978) – that philologists recognized that the texts reflected systematically organized spoken languages, and that the
changes from one stage of a language to another were fully systematic. A *t* sound in an older stage of a language might become a *d* between vowels, but when it did, it affected all parts of the vocabulary at the same time. The key insight of the Neogrammarians, then, was the doctrine of the *regularity of sound change*. Older scholars had also noticed that many of the classical and modern languages of Europe and Asia resembled each other, for example Danish, English, Latin, Greek, Sanskrit, and Armenian, but they were unable to show the relationships among them until they focused on systematic differences among them, in the Neogrammarian style. (We now know that all of these languages are members of an extended Eurasian language family, Indo-European, whose progenitor was spoken on the central Asian steppes between 6,000 and 8,000 years ago [Fortson 2010, Anthony 2007, Chang et al. 2015]). The *regularity of sound change* provided the key tool for understanding groupings of languages into families – not by similarities among them, but by patterned differences.

**The Discovery of Structure**

Linguistics and Anthropology in language unfolded over almost a half-century, independently in Europe and in America. In Europe, at the beginning of the twentieth century, one of the greatest of the Neogrammarians, Ferdinand de Saussure [1857–1913, trained in Leipzig] was tasked with organizing a course in general linguistics at the university of his home city, Geneva, Switzerland. Saussure divided the task into three domains: the Neogrammarian historical linguistics in which he was trained; linguistic geography (which was of special interest in Switzerland); and *synchronic linguistics*, the study of language in a single slice of time. Saussure modeled both dialect geography and synchronic linguistics on historical Neogrammarian linguistics, concerned not so much with similarities, as with identifying patterned, systematic differences. “In language,” he wrote, “there is nothing but difference.” Thus, though the French word *mouton* is translated in French–English dictionaries as *sheep*, it does not mean the same thing as *sheep*. In French, *mouton* is used both for the animal and for its meat; in English, *sheep* is part of a relational structure that includes the word *mutton*. Thus *sheep* in English refers only to the animal, and not to its meat; *mutton* only to the meat (in spite of its history). Both English words define each other relationally, by what they are not. Saussure’s observations extend to the grammatical systems of languages: Slavic languages such as Russian have very complex aspectual systems, grammatical systems that allow you – nay, require you – to divide the time that an action takes in certain ways; French – like Russian, an Indo-European language – has a fairly simple aspectual system. In each case, the aspectual categories are defined internal to the language as part of an aspectual structure – the aspectual categories of Russian defining their values through their relationship to each other (in Russian) and the aspectual categories of French defining their values through their relationship to each other (in French). The aspectual categories of Russian do not translate easily into the aspectual categories of French, nor vice versa but neither are they random: there are recurrent patterns of value in aspectual systems of languages the world over. Saussure’s famous dictum of “the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign” posited that the relative independence of sound and meaning allowed him to preserve the Neogrammarian principle of the *regularity of sound change*, since it accounted for the fact that sound change was, by and large, undeflected by the meanings or the meaning classes of words.

Saussure’s posthumously published book, *Course in General Linguistics* (1916), distilled three sets of his lectures into a broad set of principles for studying language historically and synchronically, and is one of the works that shaped not only disciplinary linguistics, but also adjacent fields: social anthropology, literary analysis, and so forth. It is widely considered one of the master works of the twentieth century.
Just as Saussure was a founding figure of disciplinary linguistics, Franz Boas [1858–1942] shaped the study of anthropology in North America. Trained as a psychophysicist, he began his anthropological journey through the study of observer effects in identifying the color of water in the Arctic. But his training as a student in Germany included a very large dose of pre-Neo-grammarian philology, and as he turned his attention to the cultures of Native North America, language became one of the central foci of the newly emerging discipline of anthropology. Language was key to his ethnographic methodology; his students were trained to begin their ethnographic research by doing *synchronic philology* or *philology of the vernacular* (Bauman 2008), collecting oral texts, myths, and first-person accounts of cultural practices that documented the cultures that he and his students studied. On the basis of the texts, they would write grammars of Native American languages and develop synthetic, ethnographic accounts of the cultures. Many of the texts were the bases of the doctoral dissertations of his students, and were published in their original languages in collections still accessible today in libraries, especially the Bureau of American Ethnology at the Smithsonian Institute and in the text series published by the *International Journal of American Linguistics* (founded by Boas himself). Many of these texts serve as the primary documentation that some Native American peoples have of their ancestral language and social practices, and so have become primary sources for language revitalization in Native communities.

Boas’s contributions to the study of language structure are as much milestones as Saussure’s. In his 1889 article, “On alternating sounds,” Boas dismantled the racist idea that speakers of Native American languages were congenitally unable to pronounce words in English and other European languages, and showed that instead, they were pronouncing English following the phonological (sound) canons of their own languages; the “sound blindness” that was frequently attributed to Native Americans was, in fact, an observer effect – the English speakers not understanding the systematics of Native American accents in English. Boas regarded grammatical structure as critical ethnographically, shaping not what one could say, but the way in which the speaker of a language habitually expressed her experiences, so that her experienced world was in part projected from the structure of the grammatical categories (Boas 1911), a position that was to become known as the “Sapir-Whorf hypothesis” after one of Boas’s leading students, Edward Sapir and Sapir’s student Whorf (see Lucy 1996, Hill and Mannheim 1992 for discussion of the history of this idea).

It was Sapir who largely molded the approach that North American anthropologists – and linguists – took to linguistic and cultural patterning. An intellectual virtuoso, Sapir was at the center of the major theoretical developments of the 1920s and 1930s in both fields, and a spokesperson for the fields among other scholars, ranging from poets to psychologists. Like Boas, Sapir specialized in the living cultures of Native North America, grounding his insights in ethnographic and linguistic fieldwork, producing analyses of the languages and linguistically related social phenomena among several of the major North American language families, with a special affinity for languages of the western United States and Canada. Sapir formulated the first precise and cogent accounts of language structure that emphasized the relationality of all aspects of linguistic form, concentrating especially on the sound system (phonology) and on grammatical categories. He was co-discoverer of the basic units of sound, along with a Southern Paiute speaker, Tony Tilohash (Sapir 1933, Fowler and Fowler 1986). And he brought his linguistic insights to culture, highlighting the relational nature of cultural patterns, an emphasis he shared with other Boasians such as Ruth Benedict and Robert Lowie.

A key nexus of Sapir’s work was identifying the ontological status of language and culture. Early in his career, he took on A.L. Kroeber’s famous article, “Culture, the superorganic,” which posited that cultures (and so languages) were held by collectivities, with a rejoinder entitled...
“Do we need a superorganic?” His reply was a resounding “no”: “It is always the individual that really thinks and acts and dreams and revolts” (Sapir 1917: 442). His theoretical excursions into the nature of language and culture were shaped thereafter by two assumptions: 1) that culture and language are primarily individual phenomena; and 2) that the coherence of culture and language reflected an “innate form feeling” that individuals have for the ways in which their languages and cultures handle everyday experience. While Sapir’s view of culture won the day among the Boasians, later he moved toward a position that favored the second assumption over the first. When older, Sapir treated culture and language as transindividual – culture was not “in” individuals, nor “in” collectivities, but had significant regularities that could be observed in everyday interaction among people (Sapir [1939] 2002, Irvine 2002, Mannheim and Tedlock 1995, Silverstein 1984).

Independently of Sapir, scholars in Europe – particularly the Russian members of the Prague, Linguistic Circle, Trubetzkoy, Karčevský, and Jakobson – identified principles of language structure based on a Saussurean notion of “value.” Like the Boasians, including Sapir, their starting point was grammatical categories (not surprisingly, in Slavic languages, Jakobson 1936), and the area that most clearly defined the nature of pattern in language was the sound system, phonology (Trubetzkoy 1939, Jakobson 1939). A leitmotif of Jakobson’s work was the principle of relational invariance, that of identifying relational structures in language that remain constant across variable contexts.

Two influential themes emerge from the work of the Russians. The first of these is the importance of identifying principles of language structure comparatively, with the expectation that one can construct an account for the compatibilities and incompatibilities of particular linguistic structures. One of the instantiations of this program was a comparative analysis of phonological systems that attempted to account at one and the same time for: the set of phonological systems that are possible in the languages of the world; possible transitions between systems; the relative order of acquisition in phonological development; and the relative order of loss of phonological distinctions as a result of certain neurological pathologies (Jakobson 1941, Jakobson and Halle 1956). Second, the multifunctionality of all talk. Jakobson (1960) argued that talk is not primarily referential; rather it must be understood as a continually shifting compromise among six distinct functions: the expressive, conative, and phatic functions governing the relationship among participants in social interaction; and the referential, metalinguistic, and poetic functions establishing relationships among linguistic units and between linguistic units and the world. The second of these was especially influential in linguistic anthropology.

After migrating to the United States, Jakobson took up the work of the turn-of-the-century American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, and brought Peirce’s “semiotic” into conversation with linguistics and linguistic anthropology. Though disciplinarily a linguist, Jakobson’s influence was felt very firmly throughout the human sciences, particularly in anthropology. Jakobson was the sparkplug of the next three revolutions.

In the course of identifying structural principles of language through their roles in socially situated practices and as conceptual constructs, neither Jakobson’s linguistics nor Sapir’s anthropology met with much approval in North American linguistics or in the social sciences in the post-World War II period, which had become firmly behavioristic. Jakobson’s linguistics, to be sure, provided the groundwork for what became known in anthropology and related fields as “structuralism” (Lévi-Strauss 1949, a work squarely within Jakobson’s comparative framework; Lévi-Strauss 1980). But, increasingly, the behaviorist program in linguistics proved to be untenable, and by the middle of the 1950s was challenged by a syntactician influenced by Jakobson’s work, Noam Chomsky.
The Cognitive Revolution (Linguistics and Psychology)

Chomsky’s earliest work was in the mathematical models that would prove powerful enough to describe syntax and provide the analytic toolkit to account for the limits on variability among languages. It also included an important publication that reset the goals of grammatical analysis, an influential review of psychologist B.F. Skinner’s *Verbal Behavior* (Chomsky 1959). Instead of limiting themselves to the largely distributional and taxonomic description of linguistic forms, Chomsky proposed that linguists establish goals more closely matching the Jakobsonian program, that is, to use syntactic analysis as a way to understand human language as a cognitive phenomenon, and to understand the constraints on possible syntactic systems (Chomsky 1965, 1988). His term for these constraints, *universal grammar*, has been the target of roughly a half-dozen frameworks that Chomsky and many of his students moved through as they sought to characterize formally human linguistic competence. Chomsky’s turn to examining the cognitive apparatus underlying grammar, using grammar itself as the tool, both triggered and reflected a major shift in the goals of related fields, particularly psychology, and spurred the emergence of new fields devoted to the study of mind and brain. Chomsky (2000) himself distinguished radically between “i-language” or grammar, as a system of cognitive rules and representations, and “e-language” or linguistic behavior (using several slightly different versions of this formulation at different points in his career), bringing grammatical analysis squarely into the domain of “i-language.” The “location” of grammar for Chomsky is squarely in individual minds/brains.

Attempts by some anthropologists in the 1960s and 1970s to mimic the goals of Chomskyan linguistics in anthropology largely proved to be still-births. But the cognitive turn in a broader sense reshaped views of culture and language in anthropology (for example in the work of Sperber 1996 and in comparative primatology, Cheney and Seyfarth 1988, Povinelli 1993). A version of the Chomskyan program for syntax has become the default analytic framework for grammatical analysis, and debate over the goals and consequences of grammatical analysis in the Chomskyan sense continue apace.

Language as Socially Embedded (Anthropology and Linguistics)

A counterpoint to the Chomskyan view of language as an individual-centered cognitive matter, sociolinguists of the 1960s and 1970s emphasized the social nature of language, showing how variation in languages could be gauged against a social landscape, defined politically, geographically, ethnically, and by socio-economic status. An especially influential version of this framework is the variationist sociolinguistics of Labov (1972), which has its roots in traditional dialect geography mediated especially through the work of Uriel Weinreich (see Weinreich, Labov, and Herzog 1968). Labov made efforts to align it with the emerging view of grammar in the Chomskyan framework, though variationist sociolinguistics largely stood as an elaboration of grammar. At the same time, the anthropologists John Gumperz and Dell Hymes developed a more broadly based view of talk as embedded in social action, known at the time as “the ethnography of speaking” (e.g., Gumperz and Hymes 1972, Bauman and Sherzer 1974). The ethnography of speaking took language as a critical point of entry into social analysis, and raised issues descriptive, epistemological, and analytic that were taken up by other anthropologists, often without engaging the genealogy of the ideas.

The ethnography of speaking represented a return to a Boasian view of language as the primary ethnographic entryway into culture, and linguistic anthropology as a central concern of the discipline as a whole. At the same time, it raised novel issues that were to play a central role
going forward: the nature of speech communities, particularly as social and political entities (see Irvine 2006); variability in ways of speaking; the functional diversity of talk (in a Jakobsonian mold); the variability of language development among speech communities: and the centrality of the analysis of the social development of language to understanding social relationships, a research program pioneered by Schieffelin and Ochs. Increasingly sophisticated discourse-analytic tools were brought to bear on ethnographic analysis, while at the same time there was a return to the Boasian tradition of synchronic philology and a move forward to understanding textual and other discursive practices as constitutive of culture.

Language as a Constitutive Material Practice

This phrase, used by Raymond Williams, characterizes the remaining two revolutions, both of which treat language as absolutely central to, and constitutive of, social relations. Rooted in the intellectual traditions already discussed, they draw as well on currents in affine traditions: sociology, literary analysis, gender studies, political economy. These are infused at their core by Peircean semiotic, reintroduced largely through the work of Michael Silverstein, but now part of the common stock-in-trade across the human sciences. Important too was a shift in social ontology associated with language. Where it was common in the past – particularly in disciplinary linguistics – to think of the social world as divided between individuals and collectivities, and to locate language firmly in one or another camp, linguistic anthropologists took up an observation by interactionist sociologists and ethnomethodologists (such as Goffman, Garfinkel, and Sacks) in the 1960s that talk, like all social practices, is a form of concerted action, found neither in individuals nor in collectivities, but between individuals and constitutive of large scale social groupings. This position effectively took up Sapir’s late views after a thirty-year hiatus, but developed them with a richer empirical toolkit, including conversation analysis. These views also found resonance in performance-centered folkloristics, Bakhtinian literary and social theory, work on reference and indexicality by Hanks, and the discourse-centered linguistics of Tannen. Much discussion within this framework has focused on reconstructing key analytic parameters of social analysis in an interactionist key, showing that practices that were once understood in narrowly linguistic terms, like code-switching, are infused with local, politically sensitive social meaning (Gal 1987, Woolard 1989, Zentella 1997), or showing that terms of art in social analysis, like gender, social identity, and agency, are built up out of historically situated linguistic complexes (Ahearn, Bucholtz, Duranti, Eckert, Hall, McConnell-Ginet). Linguistic anthropologists have been prominent in two major intellectual movements within disciplinary linguistics – the study of language, gender, and sexuality; and sociophonetics (with substantial overlap between them).

Language as Constitutive of Populations

Lastly, linguistic anthropologists have challenged the very idea of “a language,” “a dialect,” or “an idiolect” by emphasizing the fluidity and contingency of all forms of speech. Where dialect geographers of Saussure’s day were concerned with mapping the boundaries of linguistic phenomena, and where sociolinguists and anthropologists of the 1960s and 1970s spoke of “speech communities,” linguistic anthropologists today are more likely to engage the semiotic construction of the boundaries as constitutive of the phenomena that we all too readily called “languages” and “speech communities” in the past. Linguistic anthropologists have traced the formation of speech communities and the iconization of social differences to linguistic practices (Irvine and Gal) and have shown ways in which linguistic practices establish normative social
identification – below the threshold of awareness (Hill). These observations have also brought
about greater reflection on the effects that linguistic documentation has had on social relations
among speakers of smaller languages – particularly languages that are now in danger of disappear-
ing (Meek). Today, linguistic anthropology is increasingly central to all anthropological research.

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