Being in the Cloud
Analysis of Discourse in Online Communities

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Introduction/Definitions

Anthropology rests on a strong foundation of fieldwork. Since Boasian tradition has underscored getting out of the armchair and into the field, we have had many evolutions in both practice and perspective to reflect current academic trends, reinforcing the fact that anthropology is a dynamic area of study. When conducting fieldwork in anthropology, one has a plethora of choices for methods – participant observation being the most popular – but in linguistic anthropology, we have a special set of concerns and ethical quandaries to attend to before setting off into the field. Many of those concerns include understanding who the speaker is and who the audience is and from whose “data” exactly we are to seek permission to document, perhaps transcribe, interpret, and potentially publish. All disciplines share some fieldwork and ethical concerns, specifically acquiring the appropriate permission from institutions, communities in question, and any funding bodies; however, in linguistic anthropology, these concerns are confounding because of the question of who.

Even more confounding than the traditional who problem is the current nature of research itself – more projects are moving completely online. The discourse community is now posing much more complicated questions. Who are the proprietors? The interlocutors? The audience? The sponsors? Doing fieldwork in linguistic anthropology used to mean carrying a heavy load of equipment (usually requiring a team of graduate students or assistants) for recording data (video and audio), seeking permission of your institution and the community with whom you will be spending time, arranging living quarters, securing travel visas, applying for NIH or NSF or some other source(s) of funding, requesting Institutional Review Board approval or exemption, and even finding one or more insiders to translate and/or help guide. Now we have much more streamlined preparation and a much lighter equipment load, but the ground we have gained with lighter and better equipment is outstripped by current ethical complexities far beyond what earlier founders of and practitioners in the field ever imagined.

Ethics and methodologies of fieldwork in communities of online discourse are the main topics of this chapter. We will briefly stand on the shoulders of the giants who came before us, those who paved the way for our perceived easier time of it, and arrive at the current issues in the field, or rather, in the cloud. Fieldwork in anthropology can certainly lend its experience
and successes to linguistic fieldwork, but both disciplines are lagging in the online domain of study. Many traditional anthropologists remain uncomfortable with online research for a variety of reasons, but the discomfort seems to be related to two issues: refusal to acknowledge the cloud as a legitimate field or unwillingness to confront the ethical maze that doing rich anthropological fieldwork in the cloud entails. When working on my research project (first, a linguistic ethnography and, later, discourse analysis of online communities), a few, more traditional anthropologists lamented the fact that I was not “doing” anthropology. I had not travelled afar, sought permission from a foreign government, arranged accommodation, or conducted “real” fieldwork (LeBlanc 2005). Regardless of the perceived or real differences from face-to-face interaction, online research is a worthy, valuable, and enriching endeavor to study discourse in online communities. This new frontier of the field is not at all new to other disciplines, and it can push our discipline forward, beyond traditional fieldwork. We live in a world of Twitter and Facebook, where people can connect on meaningful levels (or on superficial ones) instantly. Hashtag and friend mean different things today than a mere five years ago. Language is changing more quickly now because our vessels for communication improve daily, not over decades. Although it may seem that language has degraded as we have gone online and use fewer characters to express ourselves, linguistic anthropologists can embrace this evolution in language and language behavior, as it affords us the opportunity not only to document changes in language morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics, but also gain insight into how human language is such a flexible, yet stable phenomenon.

Many of us spend significant amounts of time online. We belong to communities that may exist solely in cyberspace, so understanding how these are constructed, maintained, and re-negotiated through technological advances is vital to our study of the essence of humanity. Studying language use in these communities is a natural extension. Once we understand how language is used in discourse communities, we gain much more insight into the culture we are trying to understand. Mary Jill Brody (Louisiana State University) has always said that “language is culture and culture is language,” which cannot be more appropriate an anthem for studying language in online communities of discourse. Obviously, no community is exactly like any other, whether face-to-face or online, so there is room for many approaches to analysis of a community’s language use. However, current approaches may not be easily transferred to the online medium. Therefore, we are obliged as scholars to seek methods that satisfy the two most vital criteria: applicability/feasibility and ethical standards. Anthropologists have created and revised the most humanistic and holistic methods of studying the essence of being human, so it is our charge to continue that rich tradition of discourse analysis into the next generations, and this entails going online to do it.

**Historical Perspectives**

Many giants before us, including students of Franz Boas, Edward Sapir, and Dell Hymes, have emphasized a most important point: we cannot do discourse analysis without ethnography. Discourse analysis should include not only a transcript of the words exchanged; it needs much more depth. Discourse analysis informed by ethnography and anthropology’s rich history of reflexivity enhances all analyses of not only discourse events themselves, but also discourse behavior. However, a greater number of linguistic anthropologists are examining online discourse behavior (LeBlanc 2010; Thurlow and Mroczek 2011). Many other disciplines, such as communication and media studies, have studied virtual communities (Jones 1997; Rheingold 2000; Smith and Kollock 1999), but those other disciplines do not examine language in use within the ethnographically informed context in which anthropologists work.
It is important to note here that scholars of computer-mediated communication (CMC) are the pioneers who have, since before the 1990s, provided much of our existing knowledge of how we communicate online (Bechar-Israeli 1995; Danet 1995; Jackson 1997; Mabry 1997; Morris and Ogan 1996; Paccagnella 1997; Parks and Floyd 1996). These scholars have begun the academic discussion of how the medium of the internet affects the ways in which we interact, conduct conversations or business, and create community. Each has offered different perspectives and within different areas of study. This is certainly not a complete list of CMC scholars, simply a sample of those who study how the internet affects our communicative behavior and who have influenced those of us who study CMC within linguistic and/or anthropological frameworks.

Danet (1995) chronicles early research that informed the more recent CMC scholars. She notes that before the 1990s, most study of CMC focused more on organizational efficiency and less on human (even phatic) interaction. She also introduces those new to the field of previous studies of synchronicity in online communication, such as Internet Relay Chat (IRC), some of the first interactive platforms by which everyday users convened online in real time. Danet also informs us that prior to her and others’ study of CMC, scholars neglected to inquire into the potential community aspects of the internet, where users went online for recreation (phatic communion) as well as for business or educational transactional purposes. Most importantly, at the inception of the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, scholars like Danet and others succeeded in broadening the field of CMC study from primarily focusing on the technical aspects of the internet as a transactional tool to also studying the social implications of being online and how people use the internet to interact for various other reasons, some of those being purely social. Additionally, Parks and Floyd (1996) discuss social aspects of online interaction, focusing on newsgroups (specifically Usenet), where users post comments or items of interest to various newsgroups on early versions of the internet. They argue, despite earlier literature and prevailing popular opinion of that time, that people do indeed form personal and meaningful bonds with other users online. They also describe what I call accommodations: how people recreate or substitute for the communicative cues that being online removes, for example emoticons, bold type, and punctuation. This research is important because it reveals not only how people use the internet to interact socially, but also how doing so is different, yet not less impactful, than face-to-face interactions.

Related to how we interact socially, Bechar-Israeli (1995) discusses the significant ways that people create identity online, specifically nicknames on IRC. Choosing a nickname (or an avatar in later instantiations of web community interaction) necessitates much identity creation work that includes consideration of what persona someone wants to project. There is an aspect of starting fresh or even hiding or exaggerating in this naming process, which contrasts sharply with face-to-face interaction. What is significant here is that once a user plays or interacts using that chosen “nick,” she builds on that intentionally and thoughtfully created persona and interacts in a community or across many communities and for a long period of time as that “nick.” Bechar-Israeli also illustrates how frequent users or players have a keen appreciation of the online medium, using their knowledge of how quickly technology changes to their own advantage and playing with language in turn. This particular work is similar to my own research in that it highlights the link between techie interlocutors and their linguistic innovation and play.

Equally important is the pioneering work of Paccagnella (1997), which emphasizes the importance of fieldwork in online settings. Ethnography is the primary and most vital step in conducting holistic analysis of language use, and the validation our field now has is greatly due to works like this and others, who have remarked on how the internet is a mass medium that is as worthy of study as other media such as television and print media (Morris and Ogan...
The analysis of the structure of language in online contexts has been addressed by several prominent scholars (December 1996; Jackson 1997; Mabry 1997). Particularly relevant to online discourse analysis in my community of study is Mabry (1997), who discusses the structure of *flames*, or heightened discourse events that often occur in online settings. *Flames* are akin to face-to-face arguments, but not similar enough to be treated the same way. Many times in online discourse communities, just as in offline instances, people will enter into arguments that may escalate, but *flames* are special discourse events that occur only online because, although interlocutors may be arguing, they must accommodate for the lack of face-to-face encounter. So, *flames* will include special discourse markers such as quoting other members’ posts before a reply, orthographic innovations like emphasizing words with asterisks, and typing “<” and “>” around words in order to convey a tone of condescension or of pretension. Much of this nuanced orthography derives from programming language because the earlier online communities of discourse consisted of gamers and/or programmers who frequently adopted conventions from their fields in order to create their own specialized language (Blashki and Nichol 2005; LeBlanc 2010; Raymond and Steele 1996).

Knowing how valuable our ethnographically informed analyses are and building upon the foundation established by CMC scholars, we can transfer our unique skill set to the cloud – bridging the gap in research on discourse communities and their interactions. This skill set is vast and unique to anthropologists. We understand the intense and extensive time requirement necessary to form valuable and trusting relationships with our communities of study, we are trained in linguistics (specifically phonology, morphology, syntax, and pragmatics), we are aware of our imprint in the field that changes it forever, and we are prepared for encountering and learning from new ways of living. With research going online, there are new skills to add to analysis (including transcription and interpretation) that are more useful to online situations. This chapter centers on these.

There are recent ethnographers of online communities, including Hutchby (2001), Holt (2004), and LeVine and Scollon (2003). Hutchby (2001) considers conversation analysis’ role to be a tool for uncovering two major themes: how technology affects conversation and how communication technologies are social (like earlier technologies of the telephone and radio). These are important questions, but better left for communication theorists, because linguistic anthropology focuses on the human essence within whatever medium people are using to interact. Therefore, although the answers to the questions regarding how technology affects communication are valuable to our analysis of discourse, these insights alone are not sufficient for our endeavor, even though Hutchby does attempt to understand how we use technology to mediate and perhaps even create social bonds. The medium does indeed matter, and it affects the ways in which we reach out to one another. We are now inventing new avenues for interactions, but does that change the interaction itself? Holt (2004) studies identity creation and negotiation via virtual media. He builds on the position of previous scholars (Hutchby 2001; Wilson and Peterson 2001) that the virtual medium is just another context where humans interact and engage in the same communicative actions to form communities. So, for these scholars, interaction itself does not change regardless of the medium.

Other scholars (LeVine and Scollon 2004) disagree and believe that the medium of interaction indeed does matter as well as affect how we interact with each other. Obviously, face-to-face communication is different from online communication, both synchronous and asynchronous. Kuipers (2004) uses this notion to push anthropologists to expand the cornerstone ethnography of communication to include more flexible, multimodal means of linguistic interaction. This seems simple initially – just add a few elements to the list of concepts within the framework – but the task is much more daunting because the medium matters in an important, fundamental
way. Unlike face-to-face interaction, online communicative interaction can be affected by the online medium itself in many significant ways: we cannot know what is happening, beyond the screen in the interlocutor’s environment, that may have multiple effects on her. Likewise, we are not “there” with our discourse partner(s) to see what is in the immediate context of conversation, much less how it may be informing the discourse of the moment and discourse beyond the moment, and what previous contextual information that we cannot experience has influenced that particular history of discourse. This is where shared discourse histories may be confounded, as the medium is also an integral part of the discourse itself. Similar to face-to-face interactions, conversations are not solely the words and accompanying gestures exchanged. The conversation also includes what is happening surrounding the interlocutors and their words. The technological medium becomes part of the context.

Anthropologists have done fieldwork online and have produced fine ethnographies of virtual places (Boellstorff 2008; Hine 2000). The fruit from these works and the work of many virtual fieldworkers today is the realization and appreciation of how doing reflexive fieldwork yields intersubjectivity, and analyzing naturally occurring discourse (unlike scripted television shows or even naturally occurring but limited, sometimes ritualized talk) is much richer, even revealing interlocutors’ metalinguistic awareness (Silverstein 1979) through their language interplay.

Boellstorff (2008) conducted years of ethnographic fieldwork through participant observation for his ethnographic project on Second Life, the virtual reality game where people create avatars, interact with other avatars, and enact lives in virtual places. One could consider these virtual worlds the latest form of an “imagined community” (Anderson 1983). The information from this ethnography is intertextual in that it streams audio and video from “real” sources while the player engages in virtual events and interactions with others. Boellstorff became a “citizen” of Second Life in order to do extensive and meaningful fieldwork, and he reflects on this dual identity as “homesteader” (Rheingold 2000) and researcher in his ethnography. This work is important because it serves as one of the first anthropologically oriented models of ethnography in a virtual space that is specifically made for creating community online. His work has brought anthropology through what was often lamented as a crisis period to re-iterate the value of ethnographic fieldwork, but that which does not necessarily require leaving home and touches on a global culture in the 21st century. Boellstorff’s work and others’ have now fixed anthropology within the other fields studying online human interaction, applying traditional ethnographic methods, such as participant observation and reflexivity to virtual places. Our discipline of anthropology is especially suited for studying online communities because we acknowledge the human essence of the spaces we create and their importance as integrally part of the discourses we analyze. We have an extensive and impressive foundation upon which to engage in the important work of analyzing online discourse behavior. What we need going forward is an amended method(s) for satisfying ethical concerns as well as for carrying out sound, anthropologically grounded analysis of language use that may occur completely online.

**Critical Issues and Topics**

*American Anthropological Association’s Statement on Ethics*

Before setting off into the field (or the cloud), one must attend to the important task of satisfying every party involved with regard to ethical concerns. The task is never simple, but with fieldwork in the cloud, even ascertaining who the involved parties are is daunting. The ultimate question for anyone undertaking this task is how comfortable are we, as linguistic
anthropologists, with the degree to which we have gone to satisfy our ethical concerns? We can certainly refer to the American Anthropological Association’s Statement on Ethics as a starting point, but even though it is updated regularly, the authors of the statement do not directly address the complicating factors of doing research online. The AAA Statement on Ethics and Principles of Professional Responsibility (2012) has a list as follows:

1. Do no harm.
2. Be open and honest regarding your work.
3. Obtain informed consent and necessary permissions.
4. Weigh competing ethical obligations due collaborators and affected parties.
5. Make your results accessible.
6. Protect and preserve your records.
7. Maintain respectful and ethical professional relationships.

Once we attend to acquiring permission from our institution, we must focus on the community with whom we plan to spend time and from whom we will perhaps record or transcribe discourse. It is sometimes an asset, as with any kind of fieldwork, to have an extant and healthy rapport with the community. We should always gain permission from the site administrator or the community leader, but far beyond this, I feel strongly that although the observer’s paradox is always present, we must still somehow make our intentions known to everyone in the community. This part of the project is where the individual scholar decides what method of obtaining informed consent works best for her project. When I outed myself as researcher, I was already a member of the community, which sometimes makes the research more difficult because boundaries may not stay erected (DeLyser 2001). I will explain that process below.

However consent is obtained, despite the fact that the Institutional Review Board still leans toward more narrowly focused and offline research and that the AAA Statement on Ethics does not specifically deal with online-only projects, we need to satisfy our ethical standards as though we are setting precedent for future considerations of IRB and AAA statement revisions. The more research projects move online, the more valuable these first projects are with regard to satisfying ethical concerns.

When I began my first anthropology project, my intent was to conduct a mini-ethnography for a Master’s thesis project. This quickly evolved into a linguistic ethnography because, at the time (2002–2005), one of the most fascinating traits of the community was their language and language use. Leet speak (“An Explanation of 1337 Speak” 2002; LeBlanc 2005; Rome 2001), or the Internet orthographic convention of adopting certain specific technological vocabulary (usually related to hacking or gaming) and interchanging some letters with numbers such as 3 for E and 7 for L (as in 1337 sp34k), was quite novel then, and the discourse community was a close-knit collection of techie-minded professionals and college students who gathered at one particular web address to bond over their shared affinity for certain items, including the latest technology. They used leet speak in specific contexts and conversations, not in every conversation. I became fascinated by this unique language community and their effortless code switching between mainstream English and this novel dialect. I had participated on the website long before attending graduate school, so when I approached the community about my idea, they were immediately receptive to my proposal, and gaining their permission went smoothly.

I obtained signed, written permission from the website’s owner and administrator, and for all other members, I posted a new thread on the main forum of the website announcing my intentions and allowed for anyone to opt out of the project via email, whereby I would not use any threads of discourse in which they had participated. I received only one response,
even though I left the “opt out” email account open for a year. Once members knew they were being studied, many took to creating the loftiest of insults to illustrate their flaming prowess; others engaged in posting ubiquitous quantities of banality just to be frustrating (both to me and the administrator). But eventually, threads resumed to their normal frequency and topics, and members returned to their usual hierarchy and interactions. Members sustained their community solidarity via many tacit rules of interaction. One of these rules was the knowledge of who were the elite, or leaders, and who were simply members. No one was overtly discouraged from joining in conversations, but most members knew when and how to enter into a conversation or how to begin a new one. If someone did not act appropriately within these tacit rules, other, usually high-ranking members would make it known that this particular poster was not participating correctly. Members also displayed and negotiated hierarchy through various forms of heightened discourse events, such as flaming and signaling. Fortunately, I was allowed to analyze threads that were initiated much earlier than my start date for research (some threads going back to 2000), so many of the usual observer’s paradoxes, such as members’ editing posts or acting differently because they knew they were being observed, were avoided. The owner/administrator gave me a copy of the archived discourse threads 2000–2003 so that even if members went back into older threads to edit their posts, my data displayed what was originally posted to the forum. My presence in the community as “researcher/member” and not just “member” did not affect any of the discourse I later analyzed because I had an unaltered earlier version. One advantage of online fieldwork if you have a good rapport with your community (even if you are never considered a “member”) is precisely this avoidance of damaging the authenticity of the field by being in it, if provided with an archive of the discourse.

One of my other areas of concern was protecting the community’s identity and safeguarding their data. I realized fairly quickly that many of my expectations of providing total anonymity would go unmet. Unfortunately, when working online, there is only a modicum of security when it comes to protecting identities, even if new or different avatars are used in lieu of the original ones. My fellow members agreed to allow me to use the name of the website where they interacted, so with a quick search, they are found. I did remove all avatars, but I provided transcripts of entire threads and this too could be easily retrieved if one searched the archives of the message board. Undeterred still, members did not seem to mind at all that their data was going public, mostly because those who regularly worked and spent time online already understood that anything they do online is public.

Yet another concern is preserving the discourse in exactly the same state as it originally appeared. In addition to using new identifiers for different interlocutors, I observed Spradley’s (1980) “verbatim principle,” whereby the researcher never re-phrases, re-defines, or in any way skews what is said or, in this case, posted in the original discourse. So, even if some institutional ethics standards may be outdated with regard to accounting for online research, the verbatim principle is never outdated. The current unavoidable problem is that with asynchronous data: much of the context of the discourse is ephemeral. No one can recall the exact environments of conversations that they took part in over the course of a year or even longer. Additionally, there are obvious disadvantages to not analyzing discourse in the moment that it occurs even though most discourse analysis simply cannot be conducted this way. No analyst can realistically record all minutiae of context in a discourse event, even when doing it in the moment or with video record. It is virtually impossible; however, one must ultimately choose whether one analyzes asynchronous discourse behavior that is already a bit decontextualized when reading and responding to a thread or with synchronous discourse behavior that more easily lends itself to rich analysis but in small amounts (in order to record every detail not only in the conversation
itself but in the surrounding contexts – linguistic and nonlinguistic). This dilemma leads to the next focus for this chapter – methodologies. Whether we choose a very small piece of discourse or enormous threads of conversation, beyond satisfying ethical requirements the decision of how to analyze what data we have is the next logical step.

**Current Contributions and Research**

To quote Ottenheimer, only when we are totally immersed in the language we are analyzing, “to the point that you can speak it naturally and competently,” can we or should we “compare and contrast worldviews as they are encapsulated within languages and address the larger issues of comparison on a holistic basis” (2006: 10). Doing fieldwork in linguistic anthropology requires of us, at a minimum, to learn the language of the community with whom we are living. How this translates to online communities of discourse depends on the language used. My project in online discourse analysis was in English, but a distinct dialect of it, leet speak. Today, most of us can read leet speak quite easily, but in 2005, it was still obscure to most end users of technology and took some time to learn, especially, fluent leet speak, where not all words were changed into alphanumeric instantiations, and much of the conversation was written in impeccable “standard” English for fear of retribution by a “grammar nazi” (LeBlanc 2005). Being online creates different layers of data that may not be present or taken into consideration vis-à-vis current methodologies. Furthermore, no single method can account for the myriad aspects of what discourse actually entails, whether online or offline. Online discourse analysis projects may vary, depending on the language in which the research is being conducted, but many projects are waiting in mainstream English. Regardless, the effort saved from learning a new language is quickly afforded to other endeavors of analysis. Building and maintaining relationships with your teachers or friends (formerly called informants) is one area that takes considerable time and effort, especially online, when you are not as easily available unless you are literally in front of a computer screen.

Another challenge to consider before beginning a project is the collection of the data itself. Some researchers may not have access to archived files with perfectly preserved discourse in whole chunks. Additionally, we must not discount the vast amount of context that is already lost. This is one hazard of working in the online medium. It is paramount that if one does receive an archive, one must either have taken part in some of the archived discourse or can be open about the fact that they were not part of the original conversation, and have therefore lost much of the surrounding and influencing contexts, beyond what the archive and distance from the event have already stripped from the data.

**Main Research Methods**

The ultimate goal of discourse analysis is to show how language is used in the moments of our lives and how language use is so intricately tied into other cultural facets – gender, class, age, “race,” education, or religion. A different approach from doing several analyses to gain a finer-grained picture of the language/culture inextricability, a more inclusive and integrated method, such as the Ethnopragmatic Method (EPM) I explain below, could account not only for what each member is doing through language and how they are accomplishing their goals, but also for what is occurring between these interactions and what is occurring on the periphery of them in the larger discourse. Members may share knowledge or information, they may transact, or they may engage in simple phatic communion by having a conversation; however, the means by which this is accomplished is informed by many different layers of pre-established knowledge in addition to the struggle to negotiate position or status. On the periphery of all of this work...
taking place in mere moments of discourse, interlocutors are also affecting, informing, and using the surrounding contextual fields.

The layered aspect of the EPM is why it is different from any other discourse analytic models (Du Bois 2007, Culpeper 1996, Sperber and Wilson 1995). Many models are useful for particular kinds of analysis, especially if one is investigating specific aspects of some discourse events, for example relevance theoretic-specific exchanges (Sperber and Wilson 1995), politeness or impoliteness in use (Brown and Levinson 1987, Bousfield 2008, Culpeper 1996), or back-and-forth negotiations of stance (Du Bois 2007). Another more anthropologically minded model, the cross-cultural pragmatics approach of Wierzbicka’s (1996) “natural semantic metalanguage,” has succeeded in producing unbiased translations of terms found in a variety of cultural settings and in avoiding those “universal” expectations of what is considered “appropriate” language use (Grice 1989).

But we are still bound by the parameters of our methods, and therefore it is imperative that we think about even more holistic ways to analyze discourse. The EPM is meant to be a starting point for the linguistic anthropologist to create a new method in this pursuit. One important requirement of any new or augmented method should be that it is applicable to both online and offline discourse, regardless of mode or medium. I illustrate the EPM in the diagram (Figure 6.1), and it is immediately apparent that the method is cumbersome and complicated and not easily adopted. But, in order to truly appreciate and account for all aspects of discourse (granted that we all agree what is entailed in discourse events and all that is and has

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*Figure 6.1* EPM: Ethnopragmatic Method (LeBlanc 2010: 118)
been informing it), we must show how and where all the aspects fit in. Where one applies this method is left for the individual analyst to decide.

I would, however, suggest the following. After traditional discourse analytic methodology, one must not only transcribe conversation, but also provide context and descriptions of the interlocutors and the situations surrounding the discourse in addition to interpretation(s). The EPM goes a bit further by visually displaying where each aspect of the discourse event may be placed and, because of that placement, be able to influence other aspects of the discourse. This of course is speculative because, especially with online discourse, much of what could be contained in the visual illustration is merely derived through extended experience with the interlocutors themselves and their discourse community and culture. This is one important deviation from nonanthropological discourse analysis: ethnography does indeed inform much of what we understand of discourse events, even if we are dealing with our native languages. I chose the stacked Venn diagram to emphasize the spheres of influence as well, but I intended the reader to conceptualize this illustration as a dynamic and fluid entity, always in flux. The individual in the center is of course at the heart of the discourse event, but this person belongs to many spheres: at a minimum, she is taking part in a conversation with at least one other person (the interlocutors) as well as being part of a potentially much larger discourse community that could contain any number of potential interlocutors. This discourse community is inevitably one part of a larger discourse community, and/or culture(s). Each of these spheres exerts influence in myriad ways and on countless levels so that by the time one particular discourse event takes place, the shared history and influence have had a massive impact on how and why and exactly in what ways this discourse takes place, as well as what the interlocutors (individual included) understand the discourse to mean (sarcasm, emoticons, leet speak, etc.). With each discourse event, history amasses, and interactions shape subsequent interactions and meanings, and the spheres morph into a unified and dynamic matrix of language in use. Different discourse communities impart communicative norms both from their specifically engaged community and from any other discourse communities that have ever housed or hosted discourse for a particular member. Dialects, second or fifth languages, and the multitude of otherwise “confounding” factors do not complicate but enhance the currently engaged discourse. It is an open system, where all levels of the discourse world are activated when the linguistic individual engages in any discourse event. No one individual can or is ever functioning in only one sphere at one time. Any discourse event relies on past communication(s) and triggers the dynamic interconnectedness of real, ongoing, unscripted discourse, potentially affecting a ripple-like change in the entire representation, or the Ethno-Pragmatic (EP) world. The point is that any discourse event is far larger, far more meaningful, and far more interesting than most analysts can account for with a more specifically focused methodology. Whether this model is seen as a method or simply a visualization of the discourse world, it diverges from current approaches.

Recommendations for Practice and Future Directions

Practically speaking, the EPM is not ideal. It merely attempts to illustrate just how complicated and intertextual discourse is. The next area of methodology in linguistic anthropology can focus on more streamlined, yet still encompassing, methods to analyze discourse of any medium or length or type.

Most analytical models may operate in only one sphere at a time, or in only one aspect of a combination of spheres. The EPM serves to highlight just how complicated even the simplest conversation is (whether online or offline), and anthropologists appreciate the implications of our complicated discourse behavior, all that it entails, and how it is informed. Duranti and
Goodwin (1992) have stated that in ethnopragmatics, not just meanings, but even motivations for language use are best understood only if we understand that language is informed by ethno-graphic history. Linguistic anthropologists have always appreciated this fact, but we have not yet been able to account for it with a practical method of analysis. That is what the future holds for this field, including the analysis of online discourse events.

Among the many methods previously employed and ones yet to be devised, it is ultimately up to the practicing anthropologist within her particular projects to decide which method best applies to her situation. However, I would urge anyone endeavoring to embark on discourse analysis, especially online discourse analysis, to remain cognizant of our larger mission of learning what it means to be human, especially as part of discourse communities within larger cultures. To “do” discourse analysis within a frame of linguistic anthropology, we should at the very least include extensive ethnography as well as linguistic and nonlinguistic contextualization, a secure and respectful relationship with the discourse community (not necessarily membership) that entails complete openness about the project, and a clear idea of what intentions about the project are for the future. All of this work, of course, rests on a carefully chosen, reliable framework for analysis that may or may not entail aspects of the EPM or other models found within this chapter.

References


Further Reading

To read further on community building in online spaces:


To gain more background knowledge on the history of discourse analysis and how ethical considerations have changed since communities have migrated online:

