

KNAW Bicentenary Colloquium
'Where is Language? Where is Culture?
13 and 14 November 2008
Trippenhuis, Amsterdam

THURSDAY 13 NOVEMBER

- 9.30 – 10.00 Coffee and Welcome
- 10.00 – 10.15 Opening Speech by Hans Bennis, Director of the
Meertens Institute
- 10.15 – 10.30 Herman Roodenburg
Short Introduction to the Theme of the Colloquium
- 10.30 – 11.15 Jan Blommaert (University of Jyväskylä),
The Poetics of Inequality
- 11.15 – 12.00 Johannes Fabian (University of Amsterdam, prof. em.),
Where is Language? Where is Culture? In the Text
- 12.00 – 12.15 Coffee
- 12.15 – 12.45 Discussion

LUNCH

- 14.00 – 14.45 Penelope Eckert (Stanford University),
Variation and the Production of Social Meaning
- 14.45 – 15.00 Discussion
- 15.00 – 15.30 Tea
- 15.30 – 16.15 Barbara M. Stafford (University of Chicago, prof. em.),
The Shapes of Order
- 16.15 – 17.00 David Howes (Concordia University),
How to do Things without Words
- 17.00 – 17.30 Discussion
- 17.30 – 18.30 Reception

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FRIDAY 14 NOVEMBER

- 9.30 – 10.00 Coffee and Welcome
- 10.00 – 10.45 Miriam Meyerhoff (University of Edinburgh),
*You Can Take It With You: Two Perspectives Of
Signaling Who You Are in Talk*
- 10.45 – 11.30 Alexandra Jaffe (California State University),
*Critical Linguistic-Anthropological Perspectives on
Language and Culture*
- 11.30 – 11.45 Coffee
- 11.45 – 12.15 Discussion

LUNCH

- 13.30 – 14.15 Abram de Swaan (University of Amsterdam, prof. em.),
*Language and Political Culture in the European Union:
The Absence of a Public Sphere*
- 14.15 – 14.30 Discussion
- 14.30 – 14.45 Tea
- 14.45 – 15.30 William Reddy (Duke University),
*Saying Something New: Practice Theory and Cognitive
Neuroscience*
- 15.30 – 16.15 John E. Joseph (University of Edinburgh),
Locating Language in the Extended Mind
- 16.15 – 16.45 Discussion
- 16.45 – 17.30 Closing Remarks

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‘Where is Language? Where is Culture?’

13 and 14 November 2008, Amsterdam

List of speakers

Jan Blommaert, University of Jyväskylä

Penelope Eckert, Stanford University

Johannes Fabian, University of Amsterdam, prof. em.

David Howes, Concordia University

Alexandra Jaffe, California State University

John E. Joseph, University of Edinburgh

Miriam Meyerhoff, University of Edinburgh

William Reddy, Duke University

Barbara Maria Stafford, Chicago University, prof. em.

Abram de Swaan, University of Amsterdam, prof. em.

ABSTRACTS

The poetics of inequality

Jan Blommaert

This paper intends to address issues of social inequality from the vantage point of what has been considered to be the typical language-culture nexus: the (ethno-)poetic structure of discourse. Starting from reflections on inequality as a sociolinguistic issue, the paper moves on to propose a method of 'voice analysis', based on an inquiry into ethnopoetic patterning of both spoken and written discourse. Examples will be drawn from the South African Truth and Reconciliation hearings as well as from immigrant classrooms in Belgium. It will be argued that linguistic inequality needs to be understood as inequality in the production and recognition of voice, and that voice analysis can bring to the surface the hidden, or silenced, positions of speakers.

Variation and the Production of Social Meaning
Penelope Eckert

The history of the study of sociolinguistic variation has unfolded from an initial positivistic enterprise, in which speakers' use of variation was taken to be a simple reflection of their membership in predetermined and stable macro-sociological categories. In ensuing years, an ethnographic turn focused many researchers on local, "native" categories, to their reproductive relation with macro-sociological categories, and to a constructivist approach to the meaning of variation. This talk moves beyond social categories to consider the construction of meaning in stylistic practice as speakers produce socially situated personae. It argues that variables do not have static meanings, but constitute a field of potential meanings – an indexical field – any of which can be activated in situated use. Meanings can range from qualities to stances to emotions, linking these in such a way that the entire indexical system constitutes a kind of ideological map. This presents a new meaning-focused variationist enterprise that moves beyond variables that present themselves as interesting for structural reasons (e.g. sound changes in progress) to selecting variables for their semiotic interest.

Where is language? Where is culture? In the Text
Johannes Fabian

The lecture begins with a brief look back at the history of thinking about language and culture in tandem in American cultural anthropology. I then identify the lineage in which I see my own work as that of Dell Hymes's "ethnography of speaking." After discussing the epistemological status of "ethnographic texts" as documents of language-centered research I address practical questions regarding the making of texts and report on the potential importance of virtual archives as depositories of such documents. In conclusion I argue that the texts we call ethnographic, being documents, objectivations, of communicative events, enable us to produce knowledge in a mode of confrontation with other cultures which we must seek rather than avoid.

How to Do Things Without Words
David Howes

Language-centred models of culture have enjoyed considerable status in anthropological theory (e.g. the idea of cultures "as texts" or "language games," etc.), until they were demoted in the wake of the burgeoning critique of "logocentrism" and dawning of the "sensorial revolution" in the social sciences, which began in the 1990s. The focus of much cultural analysis has shifted to other forms of communication: visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, and tactile. This paper will take stock of this shift and draw out its implications for some classic discussions in anthropological linguistics, such as the basic colour terms debate, and the controversy surrounding the Piraha (reputed to have the most minimal or "primitive" language of any culture). This paper will also advocate renewed attention to the sensorial underpinnings of language itself.

Critical linguistic-anthropological perspectives on language and culture : the making of codes, identities and their relationships in situated practice

Alexandra Jaffe

In Corsica, and other places in which there are efforts to revitalize or maintain a minority, heritage or indigenous language, the questions posed by the title of this colloquium are at the very core of social debate and social practice surrounding the use, teaching and status of the Corsican language. In fact, it could be argued that in contexts like this one, what is at stake for members of the society is defining language, culture and their relationship. This is an inherently political and ideological struggle, since definitional rights reflect (and confer) other forms of authority and legitimacy.

My work over the years on Corsican language ideologies, politics and practices leads me to two general positions on language and culture : 1) The imbrications of linguistic, cultural and political issues on the ground demands the integration of cultural and linguistic theory and method; 2) The analytical process must be careful not to take either language or culture for granted, or to assume the nature of the relationship between them, but rather, to take the definitional process as the object of inquiry. Following these lines, my presentation takes what could be labelled a critical linguistic-anthropological perspective that focuses on the way that the connection between language and culture is construed or constituted in both situated social practice and through discursive processes, paying attention to contexts which construe that connection as intrinsic or essential as well as those in which language and culture are discursively (or otherwise) decoupled.

Analysis of data from a Corsican bilingual school takes up two issues: 1) the materiality and embodiment of textual and oral practices, focusing on the way that processes of inscription both make their object (a language) and structure individual and collective relationships with it (“make the body tell the code,” in de Certeau’s 1984 formulation); 2) the social and cultural grounding and significance of acts of teacher *stance*, focusing on the interaction between the inherently reflexive qualities of language and the roles and role relationships defined by institutional frameworks. Both of these sets of data emphasize how specific practices bind language and culture together in particular ways; I conclude by discussing how minority language education also works to decouple “essential” models of the relationship between language and cultural identity, replacing them with models of “identification” in which individual agency and choice are given priority.

Locating Language in the Extended Mind

John Joseph

It often happens in both science and politics that a paradigm change for which an opposing camp has been arguing for decades is finally realised from within the paradigmatic camp itself. Something of the sort has been happening in cognitive science and the philosophy of mind over the last several years with the rise of the models known as “distributed cognition” and the “extended mind”. Some versions hold that the beginnings of language created the mind, or extended the brain into a mind. Once the mind was operational, it began reacting upon language, and in time the mind was extended to include instruments of writing and even the texts produced.

With the extended mind, the relationship between, on the one hand, the autonomous mind seated in the brain or conflated into a mind/brain, and on the other, the world around it, shifts dramatically. The answer to the question “Where is language?” ceases to be a choice between locating it in the mind or in society, or ambiguously in both. The question is shifted onto a different series of problems which modern linguistics, focussed as it has been on the mind–society polarisation, has

largely kept under wraps. The concept of “language” the mass noun is historically an abstraction out of “language” the count noun, which is itself an abstraction out of verbs for speaking or talking, or nouns for the tongue or mouth or other organs of phonation. The abstractions historically have not occurred prior to the practice of writing. If writing extended the mind, which language had created as an extension of the brain, it is no less the case that writing extended the tongue into a language — conceptually, and in its effects on the form of the language. Indeed, so powerful are two of the products of the extended mind, the books called grammars and lexicons, that modern linguistic science continues to project these books back into its conception of the unextended mind, treating grammar and lexicon as its two linguistic modules and forgetting that they were ever metaphors.

But once we *extend* the concept of mind beyond the brain and distribute cognition beyond the individual, the abstractions and metaphors starts to look more coherent. Language is simultaneously in texts, in interpersonal exchanges, and in nervous systems. The problem of definitional circularity vanishes, because we are no longer choosing one of these as the location of language, but distributing it amongst all of them. In doing this, we are moving from language narrowly-defined to “extended language”, as a consequence, both logical and necessary, of the move from mind as contained in the head to the extended mind.

Returning to the question “Where is language?”, any narrow definition of language we adopt will entail an answer automatically and tautologically as a consequence of the definition. Language as a mental faculty is in the mind. Language as a means or method of communicating is in interpersonal relations or their higher abstraction, society. Language as talk is in utterances or texts. If we open it up to extended language, an automatic answer is still entailed, namely that it is in all these areas of the extended mind — and insofar as my interlocutors, hearers and readers are all my co-authors, my cognition and theirs are co-distributed. In principle, there is no clear-cut line between the individual and the social in the extended mind. For this reason, the prospect of reconceiving language in dialogue with reconceptions of mind and cognition is promising, in particular because the latter have gone some way toward undoing the narrow definitions that have been accepted as natural truths for so long. This paper will examine the prospects opened by the extended mind and distributed cognition for reconceiving language in its interpersonal, textual, macro-social and institutional dimensions, as well as their limits, and will conclude with an attempt at an answer to the question “Where is language?” framed within this perspective.

You can take it with you: Two perspectives on signaling who you are in talk

Miriam Meyerhoff

We are taught that the most basic fact of life is “you can't take it with you”. In some respects, this is certainly true, but not in language. In this paper, I want to explore two linguistic examples where the interplay between linguistic and cultural factors suggest that in some sense we *can* take it with us. I look first at an example showing how very subtle linguistic patterns hold sway over a speaker’s behaviour long after it seems that they have cast off their original ways of speaking. In this case, it’s perhaps not so much a case of what speakers can take with them, as what they can’t leave behind. In the second example, I draw back from the individual and consider the larger picture in which sociolinguistic norms are transformed – but perpetuated – in a community of speakers. The data I examine do not shed direct light on the relationship between actors’ beliefs about the processes and outcomes of change (I will explain why in more detail below), but the data is suggestive of ways in which sociolinguistics can contribute more directly to this enterprise.

Saying Something New: Practice Theory and Cognitive Neuroscience
William Reddy

Practice theory, widely and variously applied by historians and anthropologists, envisions the human actor as "loosely structured," in Sherry Ortner's words, or as "both 'various,' and 'creative' in the way they conceive of interests," as William Sewell puts it. Recent research in cognitive neuroscience provides interesting confirmation of, and models for thinking about, this kind of actor. Before one can draw on such research, however, one must address an epistemological problem. Foucault and others have argued that all social science knowing is interpretive or "discursive," and has no special authoritative access to evidence. Experimental evidence is therefore suspect, because its character is predetermined by interpretive or discursive presuppositions. The history of the social sciences, it has been persuasively argued, is filled with examples of ungrounded claims to empirical objectivity. However, this critique is based on a conception of language that derives from structural linguistics. I will argue that structural linguistics was itself an empirical social science carried out via hypothesis and testing in a disenchanted world. In that respect, it has no more, nor less, authority than current neuroscience research on speech recognition or object recognition. I will argue that recent research forces us to reject Saussure's "top-down" understanding of linguistic structure. In doing so, it forces us to modify the understanding of "discourse," or "writing" in poststructuralist theory, as well as to set aside certain features of Foucault's understanding of the "subject." Cognitive neuroscience resoundingly confirms the claims historians, anthropologists, and others have made about the powerful impact of cultural factors on perception and practice. But cognitive neuroscience does not support the idea that perception is completely "constructed" by learned responses. Instead, it suggests we understand human linguistic competence and agency as the outcome of prodigious feats of translation.

The Shapes of Order
Barbara Maria Stafford

In music theory, underscore refers to how it is that the buried thread of a melody is able to stay out of the way of the dialogue and yet still influence it. Similarly, Romantic "grammars of expression" sought to uncover the mind's subterranean intuiting and interpreting machinery externalized in the skeletal formats underlying all complex artistic production. J.H. Fuseli and William Blake maintained that the conceptual content of an image could not be perceived by the viewer if it did not appeal to early preverbal forms of affective thought—that is, to nonconscious integrating processes. This sensuous knowing is typical of oral cultures in general where magical media have a life of their own and materialize the absent body, memory, imagination into an intuitive scaffolding supporting an ascending scale of complex forms.

Long before our contemporary fascination with "moral grammars" and the birth of religious values, early-modern artists and thinkers were exploring primitive gut reactions to environmental features, facial traits, and bodily gestures. Split-second decisions and instantaneous emotional judgments enhanced survival in a dangerous world. Evidence for such unconscious aesthetic and moral reasoning can be found in ancient systems of abstraction. Visual formulas, geometric schemata, vertical, horizontal, or diagonal lines and their corresponding color primaries are, in fact, not so simple. According to the Romantic genealogy of human thought, these primitive graphic elements were both a universal, inborn, and general template for framing reality, gridding the chromatic flux of phenomenal appearances, and a non-metaphorical brief picture, exhibiting the spontaneous workings of human cognition.

Drawing on recent work by Mark Hauser (moral grammars), Steven Pinker (English verb systems), Andrew Goatly (metaphor and ideology), Terrence Deacon

(homo sapiens as the symbolic species), I will argue against the “language of thought”/”thought as language” paradigm in favor of an intuitive, direct, imagistic somaaesthetics predating language.

Language and political culture in the European Union: the absence of a public sphere

Abram de Swaan

The EU celebrates the diversity of languages in Europe as a great treasure and a corollary of cultural diversity. It is neither. But it does constitute a major obstacle on the way to a shared political culture that could transform the Union into a polity in the true sense of the term. What causes the Commission to hold on to this particular rhetoric? What are the actual dynamics of language spread from the founding of the Community up to the recent enlargements of the EU? What solutions could contribute to the emergence of a European political culture and a greater involvement of European citizens with the EU?