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It's All Relative: How Linguists and Anthropologists View Language Differently

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It's All Relative: How Linguists and Anthropologists View Language Differently

Only recently did I become aware of the distinction between linguistics and linguistic anthropology. My previous understanding of linguistics was as a field of anthropology, the fourth of Franz Boas' fourfold schema; and the very existence of linguistic anthropology as a field of its own was unknown to me. Once I learned that linguistic anthropology was considered a separate field from linguistics, the distinction between the two continued to elude me, and I viewed the former as redundant. However, as I now understand it, the difference can be expressed in a form as elegant and palatable as a single word: Context. It is my understanding that context is the single feature that defines linguistic anthropology, while excluding linguistics.

Linguistic anthropologists study language as an integrated and inextricable component of a broader system, namely society. Linguists study language as an insular and self-contained system. These two approaches to the study of language appear to correlate closely to a pair of terms proposed by William Hanks in his comprehensive work *Language and Communicative Practices*: "relationality" and "irreducibility", respectively.

Hanks defines the latter by writing that "[t]o talk of an inner logic is to say that language is irreducible, that its structure and evolution cannot be explained by appeals to nonlinguistic behavior, to emotion, desire, psychology, rationality, strategy, social structure, or indeed any other phenomenon outside the linguistic fact itself. We can pile on as many contingent facts of contexts as we wish, but language the code remains relatively autonomous" (Hanks 1996, p. 6). This perspective is attributed by Hanks to renowned linguists Ferdinand Saussure, Noam Chomsky, and Roman Jakobson.

Of relationality, Hanks writes the following: “Here we come to the inverse thesis, which I call relationality. It is actually a family of approaches that have in common a focus on the cross-linkages between language and context and a commitment to encompass language within them. Irreducibility is of course built on a logic of relations, too, as we will see in Part 1 of this book. But the critical difference is that formalisms based on the irreducible system of language always posit a boundary between relations inside the system and relations between the system and the world outside of it” (Hanks 1996, p. 7). Hanks attributes this perspective to noted anthropologist Franz Boas, anthropologist and linguist Edward Sapir, and a variety of other figures including philosophers, psycholinguists, and sociologists.

In this paper, I will discuss a selection of the various forms and manifestations of context in descending order of immediacy. First will come a discussion of context in its most basic and everyday forms, as demonstrated by an example from Hanks’ *Language and Communicative Practices*; second, a discourse on language as a tangible thing interfacing with a real societal context, with regard to Benjamin Whorf’s relativity hypothesis and Hanks’ reflexivity retort; and finally, a mention of multiple languages as context to one another forming a structure of meta-context, comparing Charles Ferguson’s work in diglossia to William Hanks’ work in early colonial Maya.

Dimensions of Context: Context in its Everyday Forms

Hanks discusses many aspects or “dimensions” of context that can impact the interpretation and meaning of even a simple verbal statement, each of them

representing a different manner in which the surrounding context of an expression may interrelate with its grammatical form to create new and more complex meaning.

Hanks opens his grand treatise with an example of language in use; two individuals sharing a routine moment in an intimate domestic context.

“Start with a simple scenario. It is 7:28 A.M. on September 19, 1993. Chicago. Jack has just walked into the kitchen. He is standing at the counter by the sink, pouring a cup of coffee. Natalia is wiping off the dining room table. Gazing vacantly at his coffee cup, still drowsy, Jack says,

‘D’the paper come today, sweetheart?’

She says,

‘It’s right on the table.’

Turning to the small table inside the kitchen, he picks up the paper and his cup of coffee” (Hanks 1996, p. 1).

The first and most readily visible dimension of context important to this scenario is the physical context. The physical context of a verbal exchange is typically shared between the participants (perhaps the only type of context to be), and contributes vital information to the discourse. In Hanks’ example, the physical context of the exchange is the kitchen and dining room of a house. (Hanks includes a diagram of the kitchen and dining room in his text.) “He is standing, about to walk to the dining room, and so can easily turn and pick up the paper as he comes to her. The two tables are in turn

anchored to this relation and the habitual motion through the doorway between the two rooms” (Hanks 1996, p. 5).

Were Jack and Natalia in a different physical context, where a different type of paper is used, Natalia would have interpreted Jack’s question very differently: “If the same exchange took place in a commercial kitchen in which large quantities of wax paper were needed, and Jack and Natalia were coworkers, he the short-order chef and she the manager, then it might be the wax paper that he was wondering about, taking for granted a history of problems with the supplier” (Hanks 1996, p. 5). Were Jack and Natalia in a physical context containing no paper at all, such as on an afternoon stroll through a forest, Natalia would certainly not have interpreted his question as a request for the paper, but as an abstract question about it; and she might be expected to answer “Yes (it did come)”; and perhaps then go on to discuss its contents, interpreting his question secondarily as a conversational *segué* into current events.

A second contextual dimension present in the scenario is past context. In Hanks’ example, the two individuals participating in the exchange share a long history. Both participants have an established and well-known habit; the events of this encounter are not new, but very routine, repeated on a daily basis. With such abundant precedent, everyone involved knows what further events are likely to transpire at every stage. The intentions and desires of the participants can easily be inferred and predicted: “Knowing that he reads the paper with breakfast and that he has no independent interest in newspaper delivery, Natalia hears his question as a request to locate the paper for him at that moment. It is this unspoken utterance that she answers” (Hanks 1996, p. 3). If Jack and Natalia were not familiar with one another’s habits, as, for example, recently-

established roommates, or strangers on a commuter train, Natalia might be expected to interpret Jack's question differently, or perhaps find it difficult to interpret his question at all. The encounter would be a novel and unprecedented situation, without the benefit of predictability.

A third dimension of context recognizable in Hanks' scenario is the context of relationship. Hanks does not specify the relationship between Jack and Natalia in his example; but by their actions, and by their words, we can infer that they are cohabitants and share a high level of intimacy and affection. Not only would we expect different words if the relationship between the two participants were different, but the same words, if said, would have a different meaning. In several of Hanks' counterexamples, Jack and Natalia are instead coworkers, and their dialogue is professional in nature.

In all these respects, and more, Hanks demonstrates that the meaning of an utterance, even, if not especially, a brief and casual utterance in an informal setting, is inextricable from the context in which it is uttered. Indeed, the portion of the meaning that is grammatically and lexically internal to the utterance itself seems to play a very minor role in its communicative power. Hanks uses this as basis to advocate for a more holistic perspective in the anthropological study of language.

But all these examples feature only two people who share a culture, interacting over a single lifetime in one immediate physical environment. When entire societies are involved, interacting with one another and with a human habitat over multiple generations, more complex and abstract forms of contextual interface are possible.

Relativity and Reflexivity: Language as a Tangible Thing Interacting with the Context of its Environment

Linguistic relativity refers to the idea that the structural features of a language (synonymity in the lexicon, syntax, obligatory markers, &c.) meaningfully limit or impose upon the behavior, expression, and perhaps even thought of the speakers. In its strongest form, it is often called “linguistic determinism”. The idea was notably championed by Benjamin Lee Whorf in his 1939 essay *Relation of Habitual Thought and Behavior to Language*, which drew from the ideas of Whorf’s mentor Edward Sapir; both scholars receive popular recognition for the idea, lending it the alternate name “Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis”, although neither proposed it in the form of a hypothesis. The concept is highly controversial in the linguistic community, with scholars holding strong opinions one way or another.

An excellent example of linguistic relativity can be found in Ayn Rand’s 1937 novella *Anthem*, in which she describes a postapocalyptic society where the word “I” is forbidden; and this ordinance is intended to preclude all narcissism and selfishness not only from the public discourse but also from the public mind. Rand portrays the exclusion of this one word from the popular vocabulary as having a profound psychological and emotional effect on the populace, even eroding their sense of self; and after gradually rediscovering individualism over the course of the narrative, the main character feels a dramatic epiphany when he rediscovers the word “I” in an old text. Although perhaps considerably overstated, Rand’s fictional society portrays the essence of linguistic relativity at work.

William Hanks gives this summary in his discourse on the linguistic relativism: "...Even more, it predisposes us to perceive the world around us in terms of a specific set of categories. This predisposition is the root of what would come to be known as the 'relativity hypothesis.' The idea is that our ways of perceiving, and perhaps even thinking, depend nontrivially on the structure of our language. Few ideas in linguistics have provoked more widespread interest or been subject to more grotesque misunderstanding" (Hanks 1996, p. 173).

Hanks relates the concept of linguistic relativity to, and also compares it against, that of linguistic reflexivity; which is a term referring, in simpler terms, to the ability of a language to refer to itself, and the propensity of speakers to utilize it for this purpose. He argues that while linguistic relativity and Whorf's perspective regard language as unilaterally influencing speaker perception, behavior, and thought, the relationship between language and culture may in fact be more symmetrical, or even reversed: "The mediation of thought implied by the relativity hypothesis rests on the imperviousness of language, the independent variable, to thought, the dependent one" (Hanks 1996, p. 193). He argues that the mutual interrelatedness of language with the social context undermines the significance of linguistic relativity, or the likelihood of its effect being noteworthy. "So long as we assume that speech follows from an abstract system that is more basic and logically prior to it, the role of awareness appears secondary and severely limited. The farther we move from that assumption, the more imposing the problem of metalinguistic consciousness becomes" (Hanks 1996, p. 193). A unilateral relationship would be expected from a formalist or "irreducibility" perspective that regards language as an internally self-contained system, as in more traditional

linguistics; but from a relationality perspective, wherein language is regarded as intertwined with society in complex ways and inextricable from it, such a relationship would be impossible.

An example of linguistic reflexivity is found in Hanks' essay *Authenticity and Ambivalence in the Text*, in which Hanks performs a case study on several letters sent in 1567 to the king of Spain, written in a Hispanicized form of the Maya language by authors in the then recently-conquered Yucatán Peninsula. (Hanks' case study is explored in further detail later in this essay.) While comparing several similar, perhaps partly copied letters, Hanks notes a series of key differences: "In summary, version I displays a more extensive engagement in Spanish speech forms than does version II. This might correspond to different degrees of fluency with the language on the part of the principals involved. Alternatively, it could reflect a stylistic choice. By using key Spanish terms - for the divine king, the Christian faith, social space, and time - version I identifies itself as already within the Spanish frame of reference. Version II, with its elegant Maya formulations, identifies itself as authentically and nobly Maya" (Hanks 1986, pp. 727-728). If a stylistic choice, these features would most definitely indicate an awareness on the part of the authors of their own language, and a conscious choice to alter and manipulate the forms to suit the new social challenges posed by their new societal environment. If speakers are capable of this conscious reflexivity in regard to their own language, it can hardly be said that their language restricts their modes of thought to a significant degree.

The relationship of mutual causality between a language and the environment of its speakers is not entirely lost upon Whorf, even in his text proposing linguistic

relativity: “How does such a network of language, culture, and behavior come about historically? Which was first: the language patterns or the cultural norms? In main they have grown up together, constantly influencing each other” (Whorf 1939, p. 81). In his final paragraph, he discusses in some depth how the structural themes that he perceives as the basis of SAE and Hopi languages might have developed over the course of their speaker histories. Of the SAE-speaking cultures, he writes: “In the Middle Ages the patterns already formed in Latin began to interweave with the increased mechanical invention, industry, trade, and scholastic and scientific thought. The need for measurement in industry and trade, the stores and bulks of ‘stuffs’ in various containers, the type-bodies in which various goods were handled, standardizing of measure and weight units, invention of clocks and measurement of ‘time,’ keeping of records, accounts, chronicles, histories, growth of mathematics and the partnership of mathematics and science, all cooperated to bring our thought and language world into its present form” (Whorf 1939, p. 81). Of the Hopi, whose history is largely unrecorded, he writes in turn: “In Hopi history, could we read it, we should find a different type of language and a different set of cultural and environmental influences working together. A peaceful agricultural society isolated by geographic features and nomad enemies in a land of scanty rainfall, arid agriculture that could be made successful only by the utmost perseverance (hence the value of persistence and repetition)... these things interacted with Hopi linguistic patterns to mold them, to be molded again by them, and so little by little to shape the Hopi world-outlook” (Whorf 1939, p. 81). But while acknowledging the mutual interrelatedness of language and lifestyle, Whorf gives causal preeminence to the former: “But in this partnership the nature of the language is the factor that limits

free plasticity and rigidifies channels of development in the more autocratic way” (Whorf 1939, p. 81). This is a view that Hanks seems to moderate in favor of a more bilateral relationality-based approach.

Through both relativity and reflexivity, among other means, a language may interface with the culture and lifestyle of its speaker population, creating a mutual system of determination, influence, and change. Once again, language is found to be inextricable from its context. But in these cases there is one language interfacing with one culture; except for the case of Hispanicized Maya, in which several languages are present, interfacing mutually with one another. This situation is another class of contextual interface, and not an uncommon one.

Coexisting Language-Systems: Language as the Context and Meta-Context for Another Language

In his essay *Diglossia*, Charles Ferguson discusses the phenomenon of diglossia, wherein several (genetically related) languages or dialects are spoken within the same society, in different social contexts, for different social purposes. Typically, one is spoken in domestic, private, or informal contexts, between friends, family, and locals; while the other is spoken in public, formal, or literary contexts, between strangers from differing regional or social backgrounds. In Ferguson’s opinion, “It is likely that this particular situation in speech communities is very widespread, although it is rarely mentioned, let alone satisfactorily described” (Ferguson 1959, p. 326). The examples Ferguson chooses for his analysis, which he considers typifying of diglossia as a

phenomenon, are Arabic (Classical vs. Egyptian), German (Standard vs. Swiss), Modern Greek (standard vs. colloquial), and Standard French vs. Haitian Creole.

In his essay *Authenticity and Ambivalence in the Text*, William Hanks discusses a notably different but comparable scenario; namely, early postconquest Yucatán under Spanish rule, the location of a sudden and violent (and at the time, fairly recent) intercultural encounter, and the early stages of an organized acculturation process. Hanks investigates a series of Maya-language letters sent to King Philip II of Spain in 1567, ostensibly backed by 80 signatories of the Maya nobility. These documents, according to Hanks, represent “[some of] the first letters to appear in Maya language, and document the emergence of a new discourse form” (Hanks 1986, p. 722). The Maya did have a writing system and an ancient literary tradition prior to contact with the Old World; but these letters were among the earliest Maya-language texts to be addressed to a European recipient. Due to their suspicious favor for the Franciscan order, and their heavy adulteration with Spanish, among other reasons, the letters are often dismissed as inauthentic examples of Maya language by linguistic scholars; but Hanks’ goal is not to evaluate their authenticity, but to analyze the fusion of Spanish and Mayan influence present therein to obtain a more complete understanding of the bilingual environment that produced them: “With all of these materials, the main challenge is not to find the native, but to show how social interaction in the colonial world gave rise to new forms of discourse, and with them, new possibilities for action” (Hanks 1986, p. 741). Researchers, according to Hanks, have more to learn from analyzing the fusion of Maya and Spanish than from dismissing these texts as “inauthentic”. Major themes of Hanks’ analysis are equivocality and ambivalence, which

(contrary to their modern colloquial usages) refer to the multiple strong perspectives and agendas that coexist within the same text, as well as within the same societies, and frequently even the same individuals, as they navigate the clashing structures and competing interests between (in this case) their native Maya element and their imposed Spanish element.

Although the scenarios discussed by Ferguson and Hanks differ in many noteworthy respects (generally peaceful vs. violent, stable and long-lasting vs. transitional, modern vs. historical, commonly-occurring vs. relatively rare, closely related languages vs. wildly disparate ones), they both involve the coexistence of several language systems within the same society, utilized by many of the same individuals, and alternated-between with fairly little overlap for entirely social reasons. From a formalist or irreducibility perspective, which regards a language as an insular, self-contained system, as “language the code [which] remains relatively autonomous” (Hanks 1996, p. 6), the two would be unrelated and separate, and their parallel use utterly unaccountable. From a relationality perspective, the choice between the two systems in itself encodes information, as does the choice to mix and combine them at every minute step, or not to; and this meaning would all be lost upon a perspective that acknowledges only the internal structure of language. From a binary perspective that regards one language as flatly discrete from another, or language as discrete from non-language, or grammar as discrete from context, these distinctions of fusion and contour could not be appreciated. The relationality perspective, utilized by linguistic anthropologists, is more comprehensive than the irreducibility perspective utilized by linguists.

Conclusion: Linguistic Anthropology as the Study of Language in Context

As has been shown, language necessarily exists within at least a few (but more commonly many) nested layers of context. A language may be contextualized against everyday spaces, histories, and relationships; against the tangible environment and lifestyle of the speakers, or the speakers' reflexive understanding of their own language; or against other coexisting languages and discourse styles. Not only are languages imbued with additional meaning by the backdrops of their various contexts, but they also contribute an effect upon their contexts in turn, in a cyclic "ongoing tension between an inner logic and a relational context" (Hanks 1996, p. 180).

Traditional linguistics, with its formalist irreducibility perspective, can potentially document a language's internal features and meaning-structures with relative consistency by isolating it from its contextual backdrop, like an organism in a petri dish; but "[f]ormalism loses in verisimilitude what it gains in internal rigor" (Hanks 1996, p. 8). Perceptive in regard to isolated grammar, irreducibility propends to overlook contextual contributions, and at its own risk.

Of the dismissal of fusional Hispano-Mayan texts as "inauthentic", Hanks writes: "By positing a pure native voice that is absent, one silences the native components that are in the language. Ambivalence takes on the appearance of inauthenticity" (Hanks 1986, p. 740). In a like sentiment, Ferguson writes, of the dismissal of colloquial languages as "degenerate forms" of their standardized or literary counterparts: "Descriptive linguists in their understandable zeal to describe the internal structure of the language they are studying often fail to provide even the most elementary data

about the socio-cultural setting in which the language functions” (Ferguson 1959, p. 340). The internal is the business of the linguist; the external, that of the linguistic anthropologist.

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