LIVING LANGUAGE
AN INTRODUCTION TO LINGUISTIC ANTHROPOLOGY

SECOND EDITION
Laura M. Ahearn

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Language, especially as it is used in real-life social contexts, can be absolutely fascinating but rather challenging to study. Linguistic anthropology as a discipline offers a set of concepts and tools for undertaking this challenge. My goal in this book is to provide an accessible introduction to the main principles and approaches of linguistic anthropology without overly simplifying the complex contributions of scholars in the field. To the degree that this book succeeds in accomplishing this goal, it will be useful not just to graduate and undergraduate students studying linguistic anthropology for the first time (to whom I very much hope to communicate my enthusiasm for the field) but also to all sorts of other readers who might for various reasons be interested in “living language.” These readers might include, for example, cultural anthropologists, practicing anthropologists, sociologists, or political scientists who have never looked closely at language in their work but could benefit from doing so. I also hope the book will be of value to linguists whose work thus far has been more technical and abstract in nature but who would like to turn their attention to the study of actual instances of linguistic practice. And finally, I hope the book will appeal to anyone who has a natural curiosity about the central role language plays in shaping and reflecting cultural norms and social interactions.

Within the United States, linguistic anthropology is one of the four traditional fields of anthropology: archaeology, biological (also called physical) anthropology, cultural anthropology, and linguistic anthropology. When Franz Boas helped to establish the discipline of anthropology in the United States more than one hundred years ago, most anthropologists were trained in all four of these fields and often
conducted research in more than one of them. As scholarship became more specialized over the past century, however, such breadth became much rarer. One of my main purposes in writing this book is to convince anthropologists in other subfields, especially cultural anthropology, of the advantages of becoming well-trained in linguistic anthropology as well as their “home” subdiscipline. After all, much of the data collected by cultural anthropologists (and by many researchers in other fields) is linguistic in nature. Linguistic anthropologists (e.g., Briggs 1986:22) have argued that such data should not be treated as a transparent window through which the researcher can reach to obtain facts or information. Rather, interviews and other sources of data for social scientists should be considered as communicative events in which meanings are co-constructed and interwoven with various forms of context. This book will, I hope, provide useful tools and examples of analyses that help researchers produce nuanced analyses of many different kinds of social and linguistic practices.

I should say a few words about nomenclature and the sometimes arbitrary nature of disciplinary boundaries. Anthropology as a discipline is not found in every university in the United States and certainly not in every country around the world. Sometimes it is subsumed under sociology; other times individual anthropologists work in academic departments ranging from political science to educational psychology. And increasingly anthropologists work outside of academia, in the private sector, in government, or in NGOs. In these institutions they may or may not be labeled as anthropologists but instead as generic social scientists or specialists in other areas of expertise, such as cross-cultural communication or monitoring and evaluation.

Linguistic anthropology as a subdiscipline is quite specific to the United States and is rarely identified as such in other countries. And yet, the core themes and approaches of linguistic anthropology as set forth in this book are ever more commonly at the forefront of cutting-edge research in many different fields internationally, even when “linguistic anthropology” as such is not the label under which the research takes place. In the United Kingdom, for example, “linguistic ethnography” has become increasingly popular as a term describing the work of scholars who study language ethnographically, as linguistic anthropologists generally do (cf. Creese 2008, Copland and Creese 2015). Some sociolinguists, who usually hold PhDs in the discipline of linguistics rather than anthropology or sociology (though there are exceptions),
also produce scholarship very much in keeping with the approaches I describe in this book. In addition, linguistic anthropologists themselves have sometimes used other terms to label what they do, such as anthropological linguistics, ethnolinguistics, or “anthropological” linguistics. Moreover, many researchers produce important and relevant work in other related fields such as pragmatics, sociopolitical linguistics, discourse analysis, rhetoric, applied linguistics, or communication (Duranti 1997, 2003, 2011; Zentella 1996). I draw upon the work of many of these scholars in this book, along with researchers in other fields. While I consider myself firmly rooted in linguistic anthropology, I share with Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall (2008) a desire to take an “all of the above” approach to the study of linguistic practices in real-life social contexts. There is nothing to be lost and everything to be gained, in my opinion, from engaging in a cross-disciplinary dialogue.

As valuable as I find much of the research on language from all these different fields, I do attempt to differentiate the approach I advocate from an approach that considers language solely as an abstract set of grammatical rules, detached from any actual linguistic interaction. Linguistic structure and the insights surrounding it that have emerged from the discipline of linguistics since first Ferdinand de Saussure and then Noam Chomsky began to dominate the field so many decades ago are extremely important to most linguistic anthropologists, but as Chomsky’s hegemonic grip on linguistics as a discipline has begun to weaken, there is even more reason to offer the approach presented in this book – that of treating language use as a form of social action – as an alternative that can either complement or cause a reconceptualization of Chomsky’s perspective on language. Ideally, scholars who consider linguistic practices to be a form of social action will be able to make use of the most valuable findings on linguistic structure conducted in a Chomskyean manner while also paying close attention to the ways in which such practices are embedded in webs of social hierarchies and identities. This is a challenging task. As Michael Silverstein has noted, it can lead to “the same feeling one has in that sitcom situation of standing with one foot on the dock and another in the boat as the tide rushes away from shore” (2006:275). Silverstein goes on to state the following:

The serious metaphorical point here is that it takes a great deal of bodily force to keep standing upright, with one foot firmly planted in language
as a structured code and the other in language as a medium of the various sociocultural lifeways of human groups and their emergently precipitated sociohistorical macrostructures at several orders of magnitude. (2006:275)

The goal of this book is to provide some concrete assistance in the form of theoretical insights, methodological tools, and ethnographic examples for those who would like to remain standing upright—those who wish to look closely at language both in terms of its grammatical patterning and in terms of its role in the shaping of social life.

This new second edition of Living Language has a brand new chapter (Chapter 2, “Gestures, Sign Languages, and Multimodality”), and I have updated each of the other twelve chapters. The book is divided into three parts. In the first part, “Language: Some Basic Questions,” I explain how language use can be conceived of, and productively studied as, a form of social action. The introductory chapter, “The Socially Charged Life of Language,” presents four key terms that will act as anchors for readers as they proceed through the ensuing chapters. These four key terms—multifunctionality, language ideologies, practice, and indexicality—can be applied in many different social contexts to obtain a deeper understanding of how language works. Chapter 2, “Gestures, Sign Languages, and Multimodality,” describes some of the ways in which linguistic meanings can be conveyed through hand gestures, eye gaze, facial expressions, and other forms of embodiment. The chapter argues for the importance of analyzing multiple semiotic modalities for both signed and spoken languages. Chapter 3, “The Research Process in Linguistic Anthropology,” describes the many different methods linguistic anthropologists use to conduct their research and discusses some of the practical and ethical dilemmas many researchers face when studying language in real-life situations. Chapter 4, “Language Acquisition and Socialization,” focuses on the way that linguistic anthropologists study how young children learn their first language(s) at the same time that they are being socialized into appropriate cultural practices. This way of understanding linguistic and cultural practices as being thoroughly intertwined can also apply to adolescents and adults who engage in language socialization whenever they enter new social or professional contexts. Chapter 5, “Language, Thought, and Culture,” the final chapter in the first part of the book, looks at some of
the controversies and foundational principles underlying the so-called “Sapir–Whorf Hypothesis” and the ways in which language relates to thought and culture.

The second part of the book, “Communities of Speakers, Hearers, Readers, and Writers,” moves on from these basic questions to consider the constitution – often mutual co-constitution – of various forms of linguistic and social communities. Chapter 6, “Communities of Language Users,” explores the concept of “speech community” and surveys some of the scholarship on this topic, concluding with a discussion of the valuable alternative concept of “community of practice.” Chapter 7, “Multilingualism and Globalization,” places these communities in a global context to demonstrate how important it is to consider multilingualism in individuals and communities when conducting research on linguistic or social practices anywhere in the world. Chapter 8, “Literacy Practices,” makes a case for the importance of looking at the interwoven nature of literacy and orality. Many linguistic anthropologists focus solely on spoken language, but studying literacy practices in conjunction with verbal (and nonverbal) interactions can be quite illuminating. Chapter 9, “Performance, Performativity, and the Constitution of Communities,” the final chapter in the second part of the book, disentangles the various theoretical and ethnographic approaches to performance and performativity and discusses the importance of these themes for understanding how linguistic and social communities come to be formed.

The final part of the book, “Language, Power, and Social Differentiation,” moves more deeply into the constitution of actual communities by examining various dimensions of social and linguistic differentiation and inequality within particular communities. Chapter 10, “Language and Gender,” explores some common language ideologies concerning the ways in which women and men speak and reviews the research on the complex nature of gendered linguistic practices. Chapter 11, “Language, Race, and Ethnicity,” engages with two other common forms of social and linguistic differentiation, that of racialization and ethnicization. This chapter describes the rule-governed nature of African American English, the Ebonics controversy of 1996–1997, and the racializing aspects of Mock Spanish. Chapter 12, “Language Death and Revitalization,” looks at some of the reasons why so many of the world’s languages are endangered and asks what social inequalities and language ideologies underpin these discourses of endangerment.
The concluding chapter, “Language, Power, and Agency,” pulls together the threads of the previous chapters to present a view of linguistic practices as embedded within power dynamics and subject to various forms of agency. This final chapter provides an overview of the social theorists, including Raymond Williams, Michel Foucault, Sherry Ortner, and Pierre Bourdieu, who are in my view the most useful for developing a deeper understanding of language, power, agency, and social action.

In sum, this book is meant to be an invitation to all readers to explore more fully the notion that to use language is always to engage in a form of social action. Embarking on this exploration will lead to a better appreciation for what “living language” can mean.
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Ethnography, that takes seriously the need to integrate a close analysis of language into any study of social or cultural practices. My colleagues at Rutgers, especially Parvis Ghassem-Fachandi, Daniel Goldstein, Angelique Haugerud, Dorothy Hodgson, David Hughes, and Becky Schulthies, have all been extremely supportive of this project. Other colleagues, including Janina Fenigsen, Bridget Hayden (who also caught my initial misspelling of “purl” in the knitting analogy), Kathy Hunt, Dillon Mahoney, Ryne Palombit, Gary Rendsburg, Heidi Swank, Suzanne Wertheim, Jim Wilce, and John Zimmerman, have also read and commented on some or all of these chapters, or have even “test driven” them in their own linguistic anthropology classes, and for all their feedback I am enormously grateful. Jim Wilce, in particular, has been a most consistently encouraging and patient supporter throughout this long process, and his belief in this book helped me move forward at several critical periods when I was unsure of how to proceed.

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And to my daughter, Melanie Anne Ahearn Black, I dedicate this book, which has been in the making in one form or another for the entire twelve years of her life. So much of what has come to fascinate me about language and what I have come to value in life can be traced to Mellie.

Laura M. Ahearn
Part I  Language: Some Basic Questions
The Socially Charged Life of Language

All words have the ‘taste’ of a profession, a genre, a tendency, a party, a particular work, a particular person, a generation, an age group, the day and hour. Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life . . .

Bakhtin 1981:293

Words do live socially charged lives, as Bakhtin observes in the epigraph that opens this chapter. Language is not a neutral medium for communication but rather a set of socially embedded practices. The reverse of Bakhtin’s statement is also true: social interactions live linguistically charged lives. That is, every social interaction is mediated by language—whether spoken or written, verbal or nonverbal. Consider the following three examples.

Example 1: Getting Stoned in San Francisco
During the 1995–1996 school year, a special anti-drug class was run as an elective in a large high school in the San Francisco Bay Area.¹ Students were trained as peer educators in preparation for visiting other classes to perform skits about the danger of drugs and tobacco. The class was unusually diverse, with boys as well as girls and with students from many different class ranks, ethnicities, and racial groups. On the day that the students were preparing to perform their skits in front of an audience for the first time, they asked the teacher, Priscilla, what they should say if someone in the audience
Figure 1.1  Cartoon demonstrating how certain styles of speech can both reflect and shape social identities.

Source: Jump Start © 1999 United Feature Syndicate, Inc.

asked whether they themselves smoked marijuana. Priscilla recommended that they say they did not. Then the following exchange took place between Priscilla and the students:

Priscilla: Remember, you’re role models.
Al Capone: You want us to lie?
Priscilla: Since you’re not coming to school stoned — (students laugh)
Calvin: (mockingly) Stoned?
Priscilla: What do you say?
Brand One: Weeded.
Kerry: Justified.
Brand One: That’s kinda tight.

Example 2: Losing a Language in Papua New Guinea
In 1987, the residents of the tiny village of Gapun in Papua New Guinea (a country north of Australia) were some of the last speakers of a language called Taiap, which at the time had at most 89 remaining speakers. Adult villagers were almost all bilingual in Taiap and in Tok Pisin, one of the three national languages of Papua New Guinea, and all children were exposed to rich amounts of both Taiap and Tok Pisin in their early years. By 1987, however, no child under the age of ten actively spoke Taiap, and many under the age of eight did not even possess a good passive knowledge of the language. The usual theories about how and why so many of the world’s languages are becoming extinct did not seem to apply to Taiap. Material and economic factors such as industrialization and urbanization were not sufficiently important in the remote village of
Gapun to explain the language shift away from Taiap. Why, then, was Taiap becoming extinct? According to linguistic anthropologist Don Kulick, the adults in Gapun claimed that the shift was occurring because of the actions of their (often preverbal) children. Kulick writes: “‘We haven’t done anything,’ one village man explained when I asked him why village children don’t speak the vernacular, ‘We try to get them to speak it, we want them to. But they won’t... They’re bikhed [big-headed, strong-willed]’” (Kulick 1992:16).

**Example 3: The Pounded Rice Ritual in Nepal**

On a warm February afternoon in 1993, a wedding procession made its way down a steep hill in Junigau, Nepal. Several men carefully maneuvered the bride’s sedan chair around the hairpin turns. At the foot of the hill, under a large banyan tree, the wedding party settled down to rest and to conduct the Pounded Rice Ritual. The bride, Indrani Kumari, remained in her palanquin, while some members of the wedding party, including the groom, Khim Prasad, approached her. Taking out a leaf plate full of pounded rice, a popular snack in Nepal, Indrani Kumari’s bridal attendant placed it in her lap. Khim Prasad, coached by his senior male kin, tentatively began the ritual, holding out a handkerchief and asking his new wife to give him the pounded rice snack. He used the most polite, honorific form of “you” in Nepali (tapāi), and so his remark translated roughly as a polite request to someone of higher social status: “Please bring the pounded rice, Wife; our wedding party has gotten hungry.”

But this first request was not very effective. Indrani Kumari and her bridal attendant poured just a few kernels of the pounded rice into the handkerchief Khim Prasad was holding. Upon further coaching from his elders, Khim Prasad asked a second time for the rice, this time in a more informal manner using “timi,” a form of “you” in Nepali that is considered appropriate for close relatives and/or familiar equals. This time, Khim Prasad’s request could be translated roughly as a matter-of-fact statement to someone of equal social status: “Bring the pounded rice, Wife; our wedding party has gotten hungry.” But again, the bridal attendant and Indrani Kumari poured only a few kernels of pounded rice into Khim Prasad’s waiting handkerchief. One last time Khim Prasad’s senior male kin instructed him to ask for the rice, but this time he was told to use...
“tā,” the lowest form of “you” in Nepali – a form most commonly used in Junigau to address young children, animals, and wives. Khim Prasad complied, but his words were halting and barely audible, indicating his deeply mixed feelings about using such a disrespectful term to address his new wife. This third request translated roughly as a peremptory command to someone of greatly inferior social status: “Bring the pounded rice, Wife! Our wedding party has gotten hungry!” Hearing this, Indrani Kumari and her attendant finally
proceeded obediently to dump all the remaining rice into the groom’s handkerchief, after which he handed out portions of the snack to all members of the wedding party.

As different as these three examples are, they all describe situations in which neither a linguistic analysis alone nor a sociocultural analysis alone would come close to providing a satisfying explanation of the significance of the events. The purpose of this book is to show how the perspectives and tools of linguistic anthropology, when applied to events as wide-ranging as an anti-drug class in a San Francisco high school, language shift in Papua New Guinea, or a ritual in Nepal, can shed light on broader social and cultural issues as well as deepen our understanding of language – and ourselves. As we move through the chapters that follow, we will be addressing a number of questions, including:

- What can such situations tell us about the ways in which language both shapes and is shaped by cultural values and social power?
- How do dimensions of difference or inequality along lines such as gender, ethnicity, race, age, or wealth get created, reproduced, or challenged through language?
- How can language illuminate the ways in which we are all the same by virtue of being human as well as the ways in which we are incredibly diverse linguistically and culturally?
- How, if at all, do linguistic forms, such as the three different words in Nepali for “you” or the various slang words for “stoned,” influence people’s thought patterns or worldviews?
- How might people’s ideas about language (for example, what “good” language is and who can speak it – in other words, their “language ideologies”) affect their perceptions of others as well as themselves?
- How does the language used in public rituals and performances both differ from and resemble everyday, mundane conversations?
- What methods of data collection and analysis can we use to determine the significance of events such as those described above?

The starting point in the search for answers to all of these questions within linguistic anthropology is this fundamental principle: **language is inherently social.** It is not just a means through which we act upon
the social world; speaking is itself a form of social action, and language is a cultural resource available for people to use (Duranti 1997:2). We do things with words, as the philosopher J.L. Austin (1962) reminded us decades ago. Even when we speak or write to ourselves, our very choices of words, as well as our underlying intentions and desires, are influenced by the social contexts in which we have seen, heard, or experienced those words, intentions, and desires before. Linguistic anthropologists therefore maintain that the essence of language cannot be understood without reference to the particular social contexts in which it is used. But those contexts do not stand apart from linguistic practices or somehow “contain” them, as a soup bowl would contain soup. Rather, social contexts and linguistic practices mutually constitute each other. For this reason, language should be studied, Alessandro Duranti writes, “not only as a mode of thinking but, above all, as a cultural practice, that is, as a form of action that both presupposes and at the same time brings about ways of being in the world” (1997:1).

This approach to language differs from the popular view of language as an empty vehicle that conveys pre-existing meanings about the world. Language, according to this view, which is held by many members of the general public as well as many linguists and other scholars, is largely a set of labels that can be placed on pre-existing concepts, objects, or relationships. In this mistaken way of thinking, language is defined as a conduit that merely conveys information without adding or changing anything of substance (Reddy 1979).

Within the field of linguistics, a similar approach to language is dominant: one in which language is reduced to a set of formal rules. Such reductionism extends back hundreds of years but was made the dominant approach of the field of linguistics by Ferdinand de Saussure, a famous Swiss linguist who lived a century ago. De Saussure maintained that it was not only possible but necessary to decontextualize the study of language: “A science which studies linguistic structure is not only able to dispense with other elements of language, but is possible only if those other elements are kept separate” (Saussure 1986[1916]:14). This perspective was reinforced by Noam Chomsky, an American linguist who revolutionized the field and has dominated it for the past 50 years. Chomsky and his followers are interested in discovering Universal Grammar (UG), which they define as: “The basic design underlying the grammars of all human languages; [it] also