



**International
Journal of Society, Culture & Language
IJSCL**

Journal homepage: www.ijsc.net
ISSN 2323-2210 (online)

ARTICLE HISTORY:

Received March 2013
Received in revised form June 2013
Accepted June 2013
Available online June 2013

Book Review

**Living Language: An Introduction to Linguistic Anthropology,
Laura M. Ahearn (2012) Wiley-Blackwell,
ISBN 978-1-4051-2441-6**

Elham Naji Meidani^{1 a}

1. Introduction

As an interdisciplinary field that considers the interaction between language and social life, linguistic anthropology has become an established field of study. Linguistic anthropology as practiced today is the understanding of the crucial role played by language and other semiotic resources in the constitution of society and its cultural representations (Duranti, 2001). What makes linguistic anthropology different from linguistics is that it never considers language in isolation, but insists on its interdependence

with cultural and social structures (Giglioli, 1972).

The book authored by Laura Ahearn presents a collection of various topics related to this vast and enlightening field. The book is divided into three parts, each consisting of four chapters, and features contemporary themes, such as globalization, multilingualism, literacy practices, language socialization and recent research processes. The discussion below will proceed in the same order as found in the book:

¹ PhD Candidate, Email: elhanaji@gmail.com
Tel: + 98-915-5048068

^a Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Iran

1. Language: Some Basic Questions
2. Communities of Speakers, Hearers, Readers and Writers
3. Language, Power, and Social Differentiation

2. Part I: Language: Some Basic Questions

The book starts out with the notion of language itself and how it can be conceived of and studied as a form of social action. Accordingly, the first chapter, called the ‘The Socially Charged Life of Language’, opens with an epigraph by Bakhtin which emphasizes that words do live socially charged lives. In effect, linguistic anthropologists reject the Chomskyan/Saussurean distinction between competence (langue) and performance (parole) and are all in agreement that language is not a neutral medium for communication. Rather, there is a mutual relationship between language and social practices and thus language, culture, and social relations are inseparable. Four key concepts are introduced in this chapter, i.e. multifunctionality, language ideologies, practice and indexicality – derived from various social theorists. These concepts are referred back to in many parts of the book and thus constitute a pivotal axis for the discussions that follow throughout the volume.

The second chapter, called ‘The Research Process in Linguistic Anthropology’, provides information about how to conduct research in the field. It starts with ways to formulate research questions, and continues with types and methods of data collection, namely participant observation, interviews, surveys and questionnaires, naturally occurring conversations, matched guise tests, etc. As expected, the text proceeds with data analysis procedures. One approach to the micro-level analysis of data explained is Conversation Analysis (CA). In this line, the theories of Erving Goffman and his notions of speaker roles, hearer roles, and shifts in footing are brought into light. As a final point, the sorts of

ethical issues that linguistic anthropologists face are discussed.

In chapter three, the relationship between socialization and language acquisition is probed. The author attempts to demonstrate the diversity across cultures in the way that parents interact with their young children as they are learning to speak. Studies by researchers indicate that cultural values, language ideologies, and social practices of a particular community can influence important aspects of the language acquisition process, such as the order in which certain grammatical structures are learned or even whether a particular language is acquired at all. Another interesting point highlighted is that language acquisition does not end with childhood, but continues by taking on new roles in life or learning a second language.

The final chapter of this part, ‘Language, Thought and Culture’, commences with a quotation by Whorf. Naturally, the chapter brings in the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis into discussion, but highlights that current consensus among linguistic anthropologists is that the influence of language on culture and thought is more likely to be predispositional rather than determinative, i.e. “the particular language you speak might predispose you to view the world a certain way, but it will not prevent you from challenging the view” (pp. 65-66). Areas in linguistic relativity such as color, space, spatial frames of reference, spatial categories, and shape vs. material composition are elaborated on by examples from different languages, namely Korean, Japanese, Native American languages, Russian, etc.

3. Part II: Communities of Speakers, Hearers, Readers and Writers

The second part of the book moves on from the basic questions to the constitution of various forms of linguistic and social communities. The first chapter (chapter five)–

Communities of Language Users—first focuses on the notion of speech community and its different aspects, specifically size and location of the community, what is shared by the members, the types of interactions the members have, and recent research drawing on the concept. Subsequently, the author enumerates the insufficiencies of the concept of speech community and presents the alternatives found for it in the literature, i.e. speech areas, speech networks, and communities of practice, the latter being the most influential.

The next chapter discusses multilingualism and globalization. It sets out with some examples of bilingual and multilingual individuals, whose situation can be shared with many others in the context of an increasingly globalized world. The author explores both the micro-level linguistic practices of people and the macro-level workings of language politics within or across societies. At the micro-level, issues such as code-switching and code-mixing between or among languages, dialects or registers are addressed; whereas, at the macro-level, stigmatization or valorization of different languages and language policy are looked at. The author mentions that studies which take both micro and macro levels into consideration can be the most beneficial in capturing the complexities in multilingual communicative interactions.

Chapter seven—Literacy Practices—defines the concept of literacy, by emphasizing the socially embedded nature of reading and writing. “Autonomous” vs. “ideological” approaches to studying literacy are described and the works of key figures in the area, such as Brian Street, Jack Goody and David Barton are acknowledged. The “New Literacy Studies” (NLS), which insists upon studying literacy as a form of social practice has its critics, who have brought into attention some of its weaknesses, such as particularism, losing

sight of the materiality of literacy and under-theorization of power.

In the last section of this part, Ahearn opens the concepts of performance and performativity to readers. The three main approaches explored in this regard are: performance defined in opposition to competence; performativity as defined in speech act theory; and performance as a display of verbal artistry that is subject to evaluation by an audience. As for the first approach, the different responses that have been given by linguistic anthropologists to the Chomskyan theory, especially those of Dell Hymes are put into focus. The second approach deals with the works of J.L. Austin and J.R. Searle; anthropological criticisms posed against speech act theory are also included. The third approach is associated with the ideas of Bauman, who believes that the presence of an audience is central to the notion of performance and that audiences should be conceived of as co-performers. Throughout the chapter, readers are showered with names of contributing scholars and their contentions. Lastly, some well-known ethnographic examples of performance and performativity are provided.

4. Part III: Language, Power, and Social Differentiation

The final part of the book examines how linguistic and social inequalities are related to each other and the sources of power that cause them. Chapter nine entitled ‘Language and Gender’ deals with the interesting and controversial topic of language differences in men and women. Illuminating extracts taken from natural daily conversations between the two genders are included and analyzed. As the author herself claims “much of the chapter has been devoted to debunking some widespread myths” (p. 211). The chapter finishes with a thought-provoking note that we are all somehow victims of simplistic and inaccurate gendered language ideologies at some time or

the other; while, what characterizes the relationship of language to gender are complexity and variability.

In the next chapter, the ways in which language relates to race and ethnicity are explored. The salient example studied is AAE (African American English), which many people mistakenly consider an imprecise or lazy attempt to speak SAE (Standard American English). The chapter demonstrates that the rule-governed nature of AAE can be seen in the various phonological, morphological, and syntactic features of the AAE linguistic system.

Chapter eleven –Language Death and Revitalization- focuses on the endangerment of some languages and the reasons behind it. Of course, the processes by which languages becomes extinct are quite complex, and the text takes into account the potential factors that endanger languages or gradually change them. Statistical information is provided alongside, which makes the situations described more tangible. The author takes a concerned tone but at the same time is hopeful that the insights and methods of linguistic anthropology can offer great contributions in making changes for the better.

The closing chapter of the volume, termed “Conclusion: Language, Power and Agency”, wraps up the text by pointing out that in most of what has been discussed in the previous chapters, power of some sort, as expressed in or through language, has been involved. Ahearn highlights three approaches to power which she claims are the most commonly used by linguistic anthropologists to shed light on power and language: the concept of hegemony as put forward by Raymond Williams; Michael Foucault’s writings on power relations and discourse; and the work of practice theorists, especially Pierre Bourdieu. Moreover, agency, another concept in this area, which may differ from society to society, and be related to notions of personhood and causality, is explained. The chapter goes

further with the statement that any discussion of agency and language must consider how grammatical categories in different languages distinguish among types of subjects, actors, or agents. “Meta-agentive discourse”, a term coined by Ahearn, signifies how people talk about agency, how they talk about their own actions and others’ actions, and how they attribute responsibility for events. The author rounds up the discussion by recounting an event that she has encountered in Nepal and analyzes it through the concept of agency.

5. Concluding Remarks

The book is replete with concrete examples taken from a variety of nations, cultures, and ethnicities. This is an especially commendable feature of the book which merits particular attention. The author draws on the existing scholarship and research, including the most recent, and also her own experiences working as a teacher or researcher in different fieldworks. She does well to bear in mind that many of the readers may not be familiar with some of the taken-for-granted terms in linguistic anthropology, and thus defines and explains each new term or concept that is introduced in a comprehensible way.

Regularly, at the beginning of each chapter, the issues that are to be discussed are specified and in the end a recapitulation of the most significant points is provided or a clear link is made with the forthcoming chapter. This orderly manner not only prevents confusion in readers, but also encourages them to follow the text with clear purposes in mind. Among the book’s valuable features is the inclusion of interesting figures and cartoons which illustrate ideas more effectively than words would. Another element which makes the book user-friendly is the comfortable style through which the author communicates with the readers along with the vivid descriptions and real-life examples and stories presented. The two latter mentioned features clearly distinguish the book from previous volumes

that have been written in the realm of linguistic anthropology. However, since the text is an introduction to the field, the topics are not delved into deeply. Basically, they broaden the readers' horizons and leave room for more explorations for those who are interested.

As a useful resource, especially for students of fields related to language studies and education, the book gives an informative overview on linguistic anthropology. The topics presented can build on students' knowledge, and in turn provide them with food for thought and inspire them to do research in their own contexts. University instructors teaching in fields related to language studies and education can use it as an introductory textbook, which touches on the most important themes and issues pertinent to linguistic anthropology and provides a solid basis for further readings and discussions.

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