2-13-1986

Language, Culture, and Discourse

Joel Sherzer

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/dlls

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Sherzer, Joel (1986) "Language, Culture, and Discourse," Deseret Language and Linguistic Society Symposium: Vol. 12 : Iss. 1 , Article 4. Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/dlls/vol12/iss1/4
My intention here is to delve into an ancient topic in the history of linguistics and anthropology, the relationship between language and culture. This topic is both so ancient and so basic to these disciplines and yet so thorny that like other ancient and thorny questions (for example the origin of language), it is a given of the disciplines, not talked about much in general terms, and even considered by many to be either tabu or else too old fashioned to speculate about. But, and in some ways like the questions of the origin of language, certain developments in anthropology and linguistics make it possible to talk about the relationship of language and culture in new and interesting ways. One new development I have particularly in mind is the analysis of discourse, and especially the analysis of discourse that is rooted in social and cultural contexts of language use and considers questions of speech play and verbal art to be central.

Concern with the language-culture relationship finds its best known modern expression in the writings of Franz Boas, Edward Sapir, and Benjamin Whorf, each in their own way. Boas, often considered to be the founder of modern, professional American anthropology, insisted on the study of language and languages as essential to training and research in anthropology. Part of his reasoning, as expressed in the introduction to the Handbook of American Indian languages, is that language patterns are unconscious and provide access to unconscious cultural patterning otherwise inaccessible to researchers. This position leads rather naturally to what has come to be called the Whorf or the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, namely that language (that is grammar) constitutes the means with which individuals think and therefore, especially as stated in its strongest form, language (that is grammar) conditions or determines cultural thought, perception, and world view. Notice that Boas, Sapir, and Whorf all studied so-called exotic languages, that is languages whose structures are radically different from English and other Indo-European languages, and in particular they studied American Indian languages, and drew their most developed and best-known examples about the language-culture relationship from American Indian languages.
It seems to me that there are two reasons why concern with the relationship between language and culture in the Sapirian and Whorfian sense has dwindled. First discussions of this issue were too vague and speculative for empirically oriented post-war social science. It was impossible to prove whether language determined culture, culture determined language, or neither. Arguments were dead ended. But second, and perhaps ironically, interest in the language, culture, society relationship quite productively gave rise to a whole gamut of disciplines and perspectives, such as psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, ethnoscience, and ethnography of speaking. Each in their own way, these perspectives continue the Sapir-Whorf tradition, without explicitly saying so and sometimes actually consciously rejecting its tenets and surely not wanting to view themselves as falling within its domain. Each of these perspectives, in its own way, breaks with the assumption of linguistic, cultural, and societal homogeneity (one language = one culture = one society) inherent in or at least not seriously questioned within the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis.

Since my purpose here is to recast the relationship among language, culture, and society, it is necessary to begin with some definitions. From my point of view, culture is symbolic behavior, patterned organizations of, perceptions of, and beliefs about the world in symbolic terms. The locus of cultural behavior can be a single individual. It is more typically manifested in or shared by groups of individuals. Society is the organization of individuals into groups of various kinds, groups which share rules for the production and interpretation of cultural behavior and typically overlap and intersect in various ways. Language is both cultural and social. It is cultural in that it is one form of symbolic organization of the world. It is social in that it reflects and expresses group memberships and relationships. Language includes grammar, but goes beyond grammar. As a sign system, language has the interesting property of being both unmotivated and arbitrary (purely symbolic in semiotic terms) and motivated (iconic and indexical in semiotic terms). It is unmotivated and arbitrary from the point of view of its properties as a formal, abstract system. It is motivated from the point of view of the meaningfulness and appropriateness that individuals feel about their language as it is used in actual social and cultural contexts. This takes us to discourse.

Like culture, society, and language, different people define discourse in different ways. In my view, discourse is a level or component of language use, related to but distinct from grammar. It can be oral or written and can
be approached in textual or socio-cultural and social-interactional terms. And it can be brief like a greeting and thus smaller than a single sentence or lengthy like a novel or narration of personal experience and thus larger than a sentence and constructed out of sentences or sentence-like utterances.

Taking a discourse-centered approach to the language-culture relationship enables us to reformulate the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. Instead of asking such questions as does grammar reflect culture or is culture determined by grammar, or are there isomorphisms between grammar and culture, we rather start with discourse, which is the nexus, the actual and concrete expression of the language-culture-society relationship. It is discourse which creates, recreates, modifies, and fine tunes both culture and language and their intersection, and it is especially in verbally artistic discourse that the potentials and resources provided by grammar, as well as cultural meanings and symbols, are exploited to the fullest and the essence of language-culture relationships become salient.

The Boasian tradition within American anthropology and linguistics did not ignore discourse. Quite the contrary. Boas and Sapir and their students insisted on the collection and publication of texts as part of a three-fold investigation of language, which consisted of grammar-texts-dictionary. But while texts were collected and published, they were not analyzed as discourse per se. They rather served the function of providing both linguistic and ethnological data. It is current work in the analysis of discourse, in ethnographic, symbolic, social interactional, and textual terms, that brings out new conceptions of structure and pattern in language use and new insights into the language and culture relationship. I find it interesting that some of the most significant work in the analysis of discourse concerns American Indian languages, thus providing a continuity with the Boasian, Sapirian, and Whorfian tradition.

My discussion so far has been general. Now to some illustrative examples. I begin with a grammatical category found in the language of the Kuna Indians of Panama, among whom I have carried out research since the early 1970's. Grammatical categories, especially optional grammatical categories, were the focus of much of the discussion in the Sapir-Whorf tradition. A grammatical category is a form-meaning relationship, a meaning expressed through a regular patterning of form. Examples are number, aspect, and tense. Sapir, Whorf, and adherents to the hypothesis associated with them often focused on grammatical categories which are not found in Indo-European languages and are in this sense exotic. These grammatical
categories reflect a different way of expressing meaning from 'our' ways, and, perhaps, a different unconscious patterning of thought.

It is because grammatical categories are economical and efficient ways of expressing meaning, especially when compared with the cumbersome translation that rendering in other languages, such as English, requires, that they often have a poetic feel to them and that they seem to touch at the heart of the genius of a particular language and especially the language-culture-thought relationship. This is no doubt part of what Sapir meant when he compared Algonquian words to tiny imagist poems. Optional grammatical categories provide speakers with conscious or unconscious decisions, choices, ways of expressing meaning, which, I would say, are actualized in discourse.

Now to the Kuna case. One of the many, fascinating Kuna grammatical categories is the expression of body position in relation to action. This category, which indicates ongoing action as well as body position, is encoded in a set of four verbal suffixes: -kwici (standing, in a vertical position); -moi (lying, in a horizontal position); -sii (sitting); -nai (perched, in a hanging position). Several aspects of this grammatical category are worth noting, as they contribute to or serve as a backdrop to its use in discourse. First, it is an optional category. That is, any verb can be used without necessarily marking it for position. Second, many verbs are associated with one of the set of positionals as the most normal, ordinary, natural, or unmarked usage. Thus:

sunmak-kwici (talking-standing)
kam-moi (sleeping-lying)
maskun-sii (eating-sitting)
ua so-nai (fishing-perched).

Since this category is optional, its use in a particular context is salient, that is noticeable. It becomes all the more salient when it is either used in a marked way (e.g. kap-sii 'sleeping-sitting,' for someone who falls asleep on a bench in the public gathering house) or contrasted with other possibilities in a verbally playful or artistic way, as in the two examples I will now provide.

My two examples are drawn from two different realms of Kuna ritual discourse. The first is a magical chant which is addressed to the spirit of a dangerous snake and is used to raise the actual snake in the air. (See Sherzer 1981.) The magical power of the chant works in the following way. The spirit, on hearing the chant addressed to it in its special language,
immediately does what the narrative of the chant describes and, isomorphically, the real, actual snake does so as well. As in all magical and curing chants, this one is literally teeming with and organized in terms of mosaics of grammatically and semantically parallel lines. Parallel lines are often identical except for a difference in a single word or morpheme. The lines that concern us here occur at the climax of the chant, the moment at which the chanter tells the snake he is raising it in the air. This occurs as follows. The snake is first described as dragging and turning over, in the -maï (horizontal) position, that is free on the ground, in two grammatically parallel lines.

\textit{kali makimakkenaiye}  
\textit{kali piknimakkenaikusaye}  
The vine (euphemism for snake) is dragging -maï (in horizontal position). The vine is turning over -maï (in horizontal position).

Then there is a magical formula:

'\textit{unni na pe anakka} anti sokwikciye.'  
'\textit{Simply indeed I raise you} I am saying.'

during which the snake is raised in the air. Then it is again described as dragging and turning over, but this time in a -naï (hanging) position, in two lines which are identical to the two I just quoted except for the change to the suffix -naï. They are thus parallel to one another and constitute a couplet parallel to the other two.

\textit{kali ni makimakkenaiye}  
\textit{kali piknimakkenaikusaye}  
The vine is dragging -naï (in hanging position). The vine is turning over -naï (in hanging position).

Thus the text never explicitly and specifically states its most important meaning, that the specialist has actually succeeded in grabbing and raising the snake. Rather, this is expressed economically and laconically, by means of the simple shift from one verbal suffix of position to another, within a parallel line framework.

There are several points to be made here. First, the maï/naï opposition is a basic element in the general poetic structuring of this text. By occurring regularly throughout the text, followed by the suffix -ye, the positional
suffixes contribute, in conjunction with pauses and musical melody, to the marking of lines within the text, an important aspect of their poetry. These suffixes also enter into and contribute to the parallelistic structure of the text. And the *maif/naif* alternation is, in the terms used by Roman Jakobson, a projection of the paradigmatic axis onto the syntagmatic axis, precisely Jakobson's definition of poetry. Here we have then a good example of what I call the poeticization of grammar -- a grammatical element or category which either loses its grammatical function or combines it with a poetic one. But in addition, the shift from *-maif* to *-naif*, at the climactic moment of the text, has a very powerful semantic effect crucial to the magic of the chant. When the snake is in the *-maif* position, in the first two lines quoted, it is still on the ground. But when it is in the *-naif* position, in the two later lines, it is 'hanging' or 'perched' in the air, that is, the chanter has performed the magical action of raising it, precisely through the magic involved in shifting from *-maif* to *-naif*, from horizontal position to hanging position. Through this mini-max solution, this packing of a maximum of meaning into a minimum of form, grammar becomes poetry and poetry becomes magic.

A completely different usage of the grammatical category of position occurs in the metaphorical language characteristic of Kuna politics, centered in the Kuna gathering house, the meeting place for political leaders together with members of their communities. The particular discourse form I draw on here is the speech performed as an inauguration for a new chief. (See Sherzer 1983: 96-97.) These speeches are typically chock full of intersecting and overlapping metaphors -- for chiefs and other political leaders -- which speakers creatively draw on, manipulate, and create narratives out of. In one speech I have recorded and analyzed, the speaker used the positional suffixes, in conjunction with a complex of other metaphors, in order to represent Kuna political structure. Chiefs are *-naif* (hanging) because they are perched in their hammocks in the center of the gathering house when they chant myths in public performances, or they are *-maif* (lying) because they rest or even sleep in these same hammocks while other chiefs are chanting or at various times during the day. Chiefs' spokesmen are *-kwici* (standing) because they stand when making speeches in the gathering house or *-sii* (sitting) because they sit on special benches surrounding the chiefs. And ordinary villagers are *-sii* (sitting) because they sit on ordinary benches behind both chiefs and spokesmen.

In this example, the grammatical category of position is poeticized, not by functioning in the creation of line structure and parallelism as in the
magical snake raising chant, but by entering into the metaphorical complex basic to the poetic rhetoric of Kuna political discourse.

Taken together, these two examples demonstrate the ways in which the grammatical category of position is exploited and actualized in the verbally artistic discourse of the Kuna. My point here is not that the Kuna are more aware of position or more capable of perceiving position than are speakers of European languages, as the best-known interpretation of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis would have it. Rather the grammatical category of position is a resource, a potential, a way of conceiving and perceiving the world which the Kuna language offers and which is made salient by entering into a web and network of associations actualized in discourse, especially verbally artistic discourse. The resulting depth, thickness, and intricacy is what Clifford Geertz finds characteristic of culture. Edward Sapir compared language to a 'dynamo capable of generating enough power to run an elevator' but operating 'almost exclusively to feed an electric doorbell.' (1921: 14) It is in verbally artistic discourse that we find language turned on to its fullest potential and power, possibilities inherent in grammar made salient, potentials actualized. It is where, I believe, we should look for the language-culture-thought intersection.

The Kuna grammatical category of position, especially as manifested in the snake-raising chant, reveals fascinating aspects of grammatical and semantic relations and relations between language and culture rarely studied by anthropologists and linguists, precisely because they can only be discovered through attention to actual instances of discourse. Traditional and conventional methods would not reveal the full meaning and potential of this grammatical category. Notice in particular that the shift from -\textit{mai} to -\textit{noi}, from the horizontal to the hanging position, in the crucial, climactic lines of the snake raising chant, depends on the possibility, in this particular context, of ranking or ordering the suffixes semantically with regard to one another. That is, -\textit{noi} is stronger, more powerful than -\textit{mai} and it is on this fact that both the poetry and the magical power of the text depend. This kind of economical shift to a stronger or more powerful form within a set of grammatical or semantic relations is often crucial in a form of verbal discourse extremely widespread in the world, verbal dueling. Its minimal form is the witty, clever comeback. Longer and more ritualized forms of verbal dueling are found among urban Blacks in the U.S., Mayan Indians in Mexico, Meztizo populations in South America, Turkish adolescents, and probably many other places. The basic principle of verbal dueling is for each speaker to provide a comeback which 'tops' its
predecessor by being maximally semantically more powerful with a minimal economy of formal effort, as defined within an underlying framework of grammatical and semantic relations. (See Labov 1972.) Verbal dueling is related to verbal bargaining, as my next extended example shows.

I draw this example from a short article by K.M. Tiwary in Anthropological Linguistics dealing with a grammatical category widespread in India and beyond, known as the echo-word construction. (Tiwary 1968) The language Tiwary describes is Bhojpuri, spoken in northern India. The echo-word construction is a form of reduplication in which a word is repeated without its initial consonant, sometimes with a vowel change. Thus the word dudh (milk) is reduplicated as dudh-udh. It is the meaning of this grammatical category and its use in discourse that interests me here. Tiwary gives the meaning of the echo-word construction as a label for the semantic field in which the base word occurs. Thus dudh-udh means 'milk and the like' or 'dairy products.' Notice then that any member of the set of dairy products can be 'echoed' to produce a word which can potentially be used as a label for the whole set. For example, dehi (curd) or maTha (butter-milk). But in actual discourse the selection is by no means neutral, in several ways and for several reasons. First of all, semantic fields are not necessarily absolute given that are merely reflected in language use. Rather it is language use which creates and develops semantic fields. This is an illustration of what I mean when I say that language does not reflect culture but that language use in discourse creates, recreates, and modifies culture. Tiwary points out that the echo-word construction can be used as a secret-language of concealment. For example, a child, in the presence of his parents, from whom he wants to conceal the fact that he smokes, can ask someone, for example a servant, to buy cigarettes for him in the market by overtly asking him to buy deslai-oslai (a box of matches and the like). The parents do not know, but the speaker and addressee do, that the semantic field of matches includes in this case cigarettes and that it is really cigarettes that the speaker wants.

Second, the choice of echo-word label for a semantic field is not neutral because the members of the field are often ranked hierarchically in one or another way. Returning to dairy products, the ranking of them depends on social and economic differences between the speaker and the addressee. If the addressee is of the lower income class, it is appropriate to select maTha-oTha (buttermilk and the like), since buttermilk is used by those who cannot afford other dairy products. On the other hand, forms such as dudh-udh (milk and the like) or dehi-ahi (curd and the like) are
appropriate for individuals of means, who can afford these items.

It is in bargaining, and the verbal dueling which is at the core of the kind of elaborate bargaining that occurs in India, that we see this grammatical category operating to the fullest, generating its fullest power, in Sapir's terms. If I am a buyer in a market and want to purchase goods for the lowest possible price, I will call dairy products maTha-aTha, thereby indicating that I am the kind of person who uses buttermilk and therefore cannot pay high prices. If on the other hand I am a seller and want to maximize both the politeness I demonstrate to a potential buyer and their ability to pay a high price, I will use duhd-udh or dehi-ohi, thereby showing respect for the buyer as a social person and also expressing my expectations that they can pay high prices. Ultimately there is a negotiation of both the linguistic form to be used and the price. With regard to the echo-word construction, Tiwary notes, as I have for the Kuna category of position, that it is impossible to uncover its full meaning without studying naturally occurring discourse in actual social and cultural contexts.

In different parts of Asia such verbal-dueling bargaining occurs in different ways. In Bali, in Indonesia, where I have recently spent some time, market bargainers use the lexical sets which reflect social caste and social rank, for example the five or six different ways of expressing the meaning 'eat.' Sellers will often choose a relatively socially high form, showing polite respect for potential buyers, but also an expectation of receiving a high price. As in India, buyer and seller verbally duel and negotiate both appropriate linguistic form and price of goods.

Tiwary, in his discussion of the echo-word construction, provides an interpretation that assumes that language is a mirror reflection of culture and society. 'this construction reflects certain set expectancies of a society in which the economic distinctions are glaring, quite old, and widely accepted for them to be congealed into linguistic constructions.' (36). I do not deny the economic and social distinctions. In both India and Bali they are old and indeed glaringly omnipresent. But I want to offer an alternative interpretation for both the Indian and the Balinese cases and one which sees discourse as the mediation between language and culture. The verbal dueling that is the centerpiece of economic bargaining negotiates status and role as it does price. It functions as if interlocuters either do not know one another's caste and socio-economic status or else that such status is fluid, to be determined in actual verbal interaction. Both of these propositions
are of course false, but nonetheless constitute the assumptions of verbal dueling and bargaining. This informal, colloquial, popular, and fleeting discourse form then is a kind of verbal counterpoint played against the backdrop of the quite real Indian and Balinese social, economic, and verbal worlds, that of sharply defined and expressed caste and status distinctions. Verbal dueling, in its own playful way, also reinforces these distinctions. This is most serious and deep verbal play.

In this example, as in the Kuna forms of ritual discourse, we see not an isomorphic matching up of grammar and culture, but rather discourse as a rich, intricate, and dynamic expression of, mediator of, and indeed creator and recreator of the language-culture-society-individual nexus.

One final example concerns our own culture and society and the notion of cultural logic. One of Whorf's favorite and best-known examples contrasts Hopi and Indo-European tense-aspect systems. Whorf argued that Hopi grammar is more attentive to verbal aspect than to tense, while Indo-European languages are just the opposite. He suggested that this makes Hopi a more appropriate language, for example, to talk about contemporary physics in. This was more of a rhetorical stance I feel than an actual belief on Whorf's part, but it makes its point. But again, where is discourse in all of this? Nowhere, in Whorf's discussions. One quite likely place to examine tense-aspect systems is in narratives, which are reformulations of previous events. Narratives in English, and indeed in all European languages, whether written or spoken, formal or informal, are essentially a replay of a series of events in temporal sequence. That is, the organizing principle of western narrative is time. Notice that I did not say past tense, since the present tense (sometimes called the historical present in such cases) can be used as well to reflect temporal sequences in the past. And in colloquial, spoken narratives, such words and particles as 'well,' 'then,' 'OK,' and 'and' are used to move descriptions along in temporal sequence. It is not surprising then that narrative theorists define narrative in terms of temporal sequence. But this is not necessarily so in other languages, cultures, and narrative traditions. Instead of Hopi, let me return to the Kuna, whose narratives I am much more familiar with. Like Hopi, Kuna grammar elaborates aspect much more than tense. Kuna narratives, while they do reflect temporal order, focus much more on aspectual matters, the location, direction, and ways actions are performed, so much so that western readers have difficulty following translations. My students and one editor find them temporally illogical. But what we are talking about here is cultural logic, as expressed in discourse. Contemporary, postmodern
novelists, in Europe and North and South America, consciously break with Indo-European temporal logic, in order to achieve avant-garde effects, producing texts interestingly quite similar in some ways to Kuna narratives. But Kuna narratives are not avant garde for the Kuna. Quite the contrary. They are steeped in Kuna tradition and represent a natural and logical intersection between Kuna language and culture. The degree to which the seeming logic of our own narrative structure is also an expression of the intersection of language and culture is best appreciated through comparison with such radically different possibilities as Kuna.

So far I have viewed discourse as a kind of filter, reflecting, expressing, and even creating and recreating the relationship between language and culture. But discourse also has a structure and a patterning of its own and this structure and patterning too can be seen as both reflective of and creative of cultural pattern. In fact, sometimes discourse can create or introduce several, even competing cultural patterns, including cultural patterns that are found nowhere else but in discourse, playing them off against each other. Such is the nature of the way culture and discourse work together. Discourse is the place where alternative symbol systems are expressed and competing cultural possibilities dialogue with one another. My final set of examples illustrates such cases.

These have to do with numbers and numerical organization in discourse. Dell Hymes has recently shown that many western Native North American narratives are organized either by two's and four's or by three's and five's, for example stanzas in Chinook are constructed with three or five verses. (Hymes 1981: 318-9) In the cultures involved, two and four or three and five are considered to be sacred or magical numbers and discourse organization reflects this. For the Kuna, as for many Native American groups, four is clearly symbolically important. It is the natural, logical, complete number of times to do significant things. Thus curing rituals are performed on four successive evenings. In the spirit world, significant events occur on four successive days. In discourse the major reflection of the significance of the number four is in content. It is often the case that events or actions occur four times. In addition the parallelistic lineal structure of ritual chanting is sometimes organized in terms of fours, as in the example I cited earlier. But the number two is much more pervasive and salient in the structure and organization of Kuna discourse than the number four, in both macro and micro terms. With regard to the most macro, general structure, myths are performed first as a ritual dialogue between two chiefs and then translated into everyday speech by a chief's spokesman.
This structure is doubly dual -- the chiefly dialogue is dual and the double performance of the myth (by chief and spokesman) is dual. This second dual structure, which projects syntagmatically several binary oppositions simultaneously -- chief/spokesman, chanting/speaking, ritual language/everyday language, ancient/modern, and esoteric/intelligible -- is an interactional, textual, and performance model of and embodiment of Kuna cultural continuity and replication, so concerned with maintaining tradition by adapting to new situations. It is interesting that on the other side of the world, Balinese ritual performances are also dually organized -- unfolding from old to new, from ancient language to modern language, and from serious to playful and humorous -- and also embody the significance of these oppositions in Balinese social and cultural life. The omnipresence and poetic salience of parallel line structure in ritual discourse is a micro or poetic expression of the number two in Kuna discourse. Thus the number two is much more salient in Kuna discourse than the number four, even though it is the latter which is clearly the sacred or magical number for the Kuna. Speculating a bit, perhaps the importance of two is a Kuna reflection of the dual organization characteristic of Native American societies and cultures further south in lowland South America, or, more generally, a reflection of universal binary thought processes. But in any case, it is in discourse structure and pattern that its salience most clearly emerges.

The number three also emerges as significant in Kuna discourse, again at both macro-organizational and micro-poetic levels. While I have just interpreted Kuna participant organization in discourse as dual, it can also be interpreted as threefold -- speaker-responder-reformulator, a structure characteristic of Kuna conversations, including the presentation of narratives within conversations. With regard to narrative content and its micro-poetic organization, typical sequences are threefold -- the scene is set, then the action occurs, then there is a coda. Thus, in a popular trickster tale, consisting of a series of episodes, each episode has the following structure: First Jaguar arrives and sees Agouti, then Agouti tricks Jaguar, then Agouti runs away while Jaguar faints. While the number three emerges as salient in Kuna discourse, unlike two and four, it is not particularly discernible as significant in other cultural realms. Perhaps, and in this regard somewhat like two, three may simply provide a natural or general pattern for discourse organization and for this reason has been thus used and elaborated.

Both linguists and anthropologists have traditionally treated discourse as an invisible glass through which the researcher perceives the reality of
grammar, social relations, ecological practices, and belief systems. But the
glass itself, discourse and its structure, the actual medium through which
knowledge (linguistic and cultural) is produced, conceived, transmitted, and
acquired, by members of societies and by researchers, is given little
attention.

My stance here is quite different from the traditional one, but reflects a
growing interest in discourse in many disciplines. I view language, culture,
society, and the individual as all providing resources in a creative process
which is actualized in discourse. In my discourse-centered approach,
discourse is the broadest and most comprehensive level of linguistic form,
content, and use. This is what I mean by saying that discourse and
especially the process of discourse structuring is the locus of the
language—culture relationship.

This is a theoretical position. But it has methodological implications as
well, for both anthropologists and linguists. Since discourse is a filter of,
an embodiment of, and a transmitter of culture, then in order to study
culture we must study the actual forms of discourse produced and
performed by societies and individuals, the myths, legends, stories, verbal
duels, and conversations that constitute a society's verbal life. But
discourse is also an embodiment of language. Grammar provides a set of
potentials. But these potentials are actualized in discourse and can only be
studied in discourse.
FOOTNOTE

1. The perspective I argue for here has illustrious predecessors, Sapir and Whorf themselves primary among them. Sapir in his book *Language* and elsewhere views language as a resource for social and expressive usages and notices the poetic potential inherent in grammar. Whorf’s concept of ‘fashions of speaking’ goes beyond grammar to include style and some of his examples (e.g. 1956: 148-156) include forms of discourse. Roman Jakobson insists in many places (e.g. 1968) on the intimate association of grammar and poetry. Dell Hymes concept of cognitive style moves the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis beyond purely grammatical concerns into the area of verbal style and his recent work in Native American narrative focuses on language-culture intersections as manifested in discourse. Paul Friedrich reformulates the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, placing what he calls the poetic imagination at its heart. (1979, 1986.) One possible interpretation of Erving Goffman’s (1974) *Frame analysis* is that there is no reality, only the frames communicators create in discourse. Dennis Tedlock (1983: 324) chides anthropologists for dealing with culture as if there were no discourse, as if the natives never speak.

I am grateful to Greg Urban and Anthony Woodbury for many discussions about the issues raised here. Our joint efforts appear in Sherzer and Urban (1986) and Sherzer and Woodbury (1987).
REFERENCES

Boas, Franz
1911

Friedrich, Paul

Goffman, Erving

Hymes, Dell

Jakobson, Roman

Labov, William

Sapir, Edward

Sherzer, Joel
1981 The interplay of structure and function in Kuna narrative, or: how to grab a snake in the Darien. In *Georgetown*
University Round Table on Languages and Linguistics


Sherzer, Joel, and Greg Urban, eds.

Sherzer, Joel, and Anthony Woodbury, eds.

Tedlock, Dennis

Tiwary, K. M.

Whorf, Benjamin Lee