

Introduction: Semiosis across Encounters

The articles in this special issue explore the many ways in which features of discourse establish forms of connectivity across events of using discourse. In doing so they open up our traditional analytic concern with communicative events to a concern with social processes that consist of many events, ordered or linked to each other in time. They invite us to locate traditional models for thinking about discourse within larger sociohistorical frameworks. Terms like “the speech event” (Jakobson 1960; Hymes 1974) or “the interaction order” (Goffman 1983) are names for bounded episodes of social history in which persons encounter each other through communicative behaviors amenable to recording- and transcript-based study, thus comprising an apparently concrete and easily segmentable swatch of social life. Yet the data of social life plucked from their isolable moments invariably point to lived moments that lie beyond them. We know that anyone who effectively engages in a given discursive encounter has participated in others before it and thus brings to the current encounter a biographically specific discursive history that, in many respects, shapes the individual’s socialized ability to use and construe utterances (as well as footings, stances, identities, and relationships mediated by utterances) within the current encounter; and if the current encounter has any enduring consequences for the individual, these are manifest in (and therefore identifiable only by considering) future encounters in which that individual plays a part. Similarly, the observation that the social values of particular speech forms (lexations, speech styles, registers, etc.) change over time is a way of noting that different sociohistorical encounters instantiate different ratified values of these speech forms and thus raises questions about the social logics that mark continuities and discontinuities across these encounters.

In taking such questions as central matters of concern, the articles collected here recall literary and philosophical discussions of the capacity of speech to connect historical moments to each other—such as matters of “dialogism” (Bakhtin 1981), or “chains of interpretants” (Peirce 1931–1959)—but attempt to reformulate these discussions in empirical studies of social life. Many of these articles also highlight the fact that the term *discourse* as it is commonly used in linguistic anthropology is a metonym of what it describes. Events in which we look at discourse-in-context are invariably events in which perceivable linguistic signs (or tokens of “discourse”) are accompanied by a range of nonlinguistic signs. Attempts to study discourse are, in effect, attempts to study the co-deployment of linguistic and nonlinguistic signs in social interaction. These articles therefore raise questions about the role of nonlinguistic semiosis in establishing continuities across social encounters (e.g., how a person’s visible demeanor recalls a “social type” of person), but they address this issue

more indirectly, and to a more limited extent, a point to which I return in my concluding remarks.

Michael Silverstein considers questions of interdiscursivity, processes whereby forms of speech establish felt continuities across speech events. How does one speech event point to other events so as to constitute an interdiscursive relationship between them? Silverstein argues that the basis of interdiscursive relations lies in indexical relationships between a stretch of discourse that is actually experienced in the here and now and some other discourse, or feature of discourse, to which the current discursive event indexically points. The discourse indexed may be formulated as a token or a type, that is, may be formulated as another discourse token (as when reported speech alleges that some specific utterance actually occurred in another event), or as some type-level aspect of discourse (a social type of speaker, a scenario of use, an action type, etc., that is generically associated with the usage). Independent of the first question is a second one, namely the question of whether the discourse type/token is treated as an indexically presupposed “source” that is simply reinvoked or recuperated in the current event or is treated as a “target” of the current act, a thing (to be) realized through that act, whether as a reinterpretation, a reanalysis, or an ironic manipulation of the type or token invoked, and thereby differing from it.

Susan Gal explores large-scale processes of discourse circulation through which contrasts between “private” versus “public” features of social life are articulated for particular social domains of persons by institutionalized metasemiotic processes (which specify, for example, *what* things/behaviors differentiate the private from the public, or *where* the boundary between them lies). These diacritics and boundaries are commonly reanalyzed by further metasemiotic processes (such as “erasure” and “fractal recursivity”) into distinct, sometimes metaphoric variants. Gal argues that bourgeois U.S. discourses formulate the public/private distinction in terms of notions of “spaces” or zones of interaction (viz., a private domain vs. the public sphere) whereas Communist Eastern European models have tended to formulate the distinction in terms of categories of individuality (private/public persons and roles). In neither case is it at all useful to think of the private/public distinction as a pair of “concepts” whose boundaries can somehow be specified for that culture. Rather, each construct is available as a presupposable cultural fact in each society and is amenable to reformulation into alternative models through further discursive activity, yielding constructs that differ from, yet come to coexist with, the culturally dominant model. These alternative models of the private/public distinction have their own discursive loci of origination, which are sometimes institutionalized as well; they remain oriented to the dominant model yet transform it in ways that serve a variety of locale-specific ends.

Asif Agha argues that processes of discourse enregisterment—processes that differentiate a language into recognizable registers, each capable of indexing a distinct speaker persona or activity type—are best reconstructed through an analysis of independently occurring discursive events (social encounters and interactions) and the structure of their interconnectivity. From an event-bound perspective, a register of discourse appears to index certain “social voices” or social types of persons (male, female, doctor, lawyer, etc.). Yet for any register, such stereotypic social personae can also be troped upon through deployment within larger semiotic arrays where co-occurring signs are partly noncongruent with the stereotype (e.g., a person who is visibly a man but audibly uses “women’s” speech). Any use of a register performatively models specific footings and relations between speaker and coparticipants; yet the latter may or may not ratify these performances, may or may not view themselves as the figures, roles, and statuses modeled by them. In an analogous fashion, large-scale circulatory processes through which individuals are socialized to stereotypic models of register use and effectiveness (e.g., through schooling, the mass media) are also subject to forms of alignment between figures performed through a register’s usage

and the self-images of those who respond to that usage. Since registers exist only insofar as, and as long as, they are recognized and deployed in the ongoing practices of users, changes in registers depend partly on matters of role alignment—evidenced in social processes of ratification, replication, and transformation—sometimes yielding counter-models that are formulated and appropriated by particular social categories of persons as their own and thus brought into a form of ratified coexistence, as meaningful variants of the models to which they are a society-internal response.

Jim Wilce explores interdiscursive processes of a specifically “intergeneric” kind, namely processes that connect distinct genres to each other: How do features of one genre give rise to those of another? How does the efficacy of one genre draw on the rhetorical features of another? Wilce examines traditions of lament of two quite different kinds: first, “lament” in the specific sense of a genre of tuneful weeping or wept song, as it is classically understood in the anthropological literature; and, second, academic genres of postmodernist regret about the loss of lament traditions in the contemporary world, a type of metalament. Recognizing the evident differences between these genres, Wilce suggests that both are organized around representations that treat the past as an object of memorialization and loss, an emphasis that, once expressed, evokes particular responses from current audiences. Whereas the first genre operates within the circle of a culture’s own history and traditions, the second takes the loss or “death” of entire cultures as an object of memorialization, often formulating the loss of more authentic locales, now past, as a reason for resisting the global spread of an inauthentic (commercialized, modernized, missionized) present.

John Haviland and Stanton Wortham both explore the question of how an individual’s biographical self is shaped over a lifetime by discursive encounters with others.

Haviland argues that the self is a figure projected through narratives oriented to a history of past encounters and interactions with others. Acts in which such encounters are told and retold formulate allegiances, enmities, and footings with the narrated voices of others. Haviland discusses narratives gathered from a single speaker, Mol Maryan, over a span of some twenty years. By examining a series of tellings and retellings—and attending to the processes of revision and reediting that go on within them—Haviland shows that certain interpersonal stances can become more repetitive and insistent than others, narrowing the possibilities available to, and constitutive of, the formulated self. In Mol Maryan’s case, a historical chain of narrative acts that re-member the past yields a progressively more rigid self-positioning over time, an autobiographical self ever more fixed, less adaptable, congealing eventually into an entrenched interpersonal stance vis-à-vis his immediate kin. More generally, Haviland shows that acts that invoke voices and encounters from the past are strategies of self-positioning in any given present and that the consistency of such acts over time can itself constitute a stabilized trend over many “present” moments, and indeed over a lifetime, in ways that shape social relations with persons whose voices they rely upon.

Wortham explores the production of an individual’s identity not at the level of the autobiographical self but at the level of a public reputation. He examines processes through which an individual’s public identity is established through a chain of encounters with the very persons who treat the individual as having that identity. By examining a chain of social interactions that occur within a high school classroom over the course of a year, Wortham explores the way in which a particular student, Tyisha (who starts the year as a “good, independent-minded student”), becomes reformulated as a “disruptive” and recalcitrant person, first by the teacher and then increasingly by other students as well. Wortham proposes that the identity trend so constituted emerges over a chain of encounters in which the trend is articulated by participants within those encounters, and increasingly ratified by them, even to the point that the person whose identity it is may be forced by degrees to orient herself to it, willy-nilly adopting it, in a practical sense, as her own.

Jane Hill examines processes through which the register of English called “Mock Spanish” comes to be linked to a variety of “keys” (Goffman 1974) and, more specifically, to a variety of stances (ranging from pejoration to seemingly good-humored irony) that become indexable through its use. Her data is based on an Internet search for tokens of the Mock Spanish word *mañana* in popular discourses. She finds that popular discourses in which the word occurs metapragmatically formulate certain features of pragmatic acts of using the register, and, especially, stereotypes about *users* of the register. These range from pejorative, overtly racist stereotypes about Mexicans (laziness, incompetence) to more favorable images of Anglo speakers of the register (laid-back, hip, cool). Looking at this process as a series of interlinked and inter-animating discourses reveals that the images of “the desirable white self” draw on stereotypes of “the stigmatized darker other,” an opposition or contrast that can itself be recuperated again and again and yet remain ironic, even deniable, in any given moment that it is invoked.

Kira Hall takes up issues of inter-event semiosis in her discussion of parodies of sexual identity among three transgender groups in northern India. Her main protagonists are a lower-middle-class group, the *kotis*, who, in a series of staged plays, parody a second transgender group, the *hijras* (typically lower-class), performing their personae by using the parodic register of hijraspeak and doing so before an audience that consists largely of a third transgender group, namely (urban, upper-middle-class) gays and lesbians. As these burlesque performances unfold, various forms of mockery and parody—which draw on the voices of the absent hijras, are performed by the *kotis* onstage, and are joined at moments by the gays now transformed from spectators to co-performers—draw together class positions and sexualized personae within the frame of performance, differentiating them in a classically Batesonian process of schismogenesis. The appropriation of another’s speech in acts that parody it makes emblems of hijra-hood available to non-hijras in the current performance, differentiating a range of indexical fractions of persona and self. The process, observed here in a single frame of performance, effectively differentiates figures of identity that can be expropriated or appropriated in subsequent interactions in a manner analogous to the discursive figures associated with Mock Spanish (laid-back vs. lazy; cool vs. incompetent) which Jane Hill identifies in popular discourses about that register.

All of these articles take as their primary focus the capacity of linguistic signs to formulate links across semiotic events in ways that yield social formations—reportable autobiographical selves, public reputations, registers, genres, private/public zones of social life, ethnic and sexualized identities—that are recognizable to persons exposed to these discourses. Yet many of the data discussed by these authors also include forms of nonlinguistic semiosis that contribute to the overall effect. Thus Wilce’s melodies and gestures that are emblematic of traditional *bilāp* laments, Silverstein’s *Austin Powers* movies, Hall’s onstage gender impersonations, and Hill’s Schwarzenegger vignettes all contain semiotic elements that are nonlinguistic in character. These cases suggest that the social relevance of inter-event semiosis, its capacity to formulate and maintain social formations, depends on a complex interplay between language and nonlanguage—for example, on sets of nonlinguistic diacritics that are assimilated to standardized linguistic classifications of personhood, or on nonlinguistic displays whose interpretants are occasion-specific linguistic labels, or even cases where language appears to play little or no role in habitual patterns of performance and response, rising only occasionally to the task of making explicit through description that which lives as a formed routine without it (Agha in press).

The commentaries by Richard Bauman and Judith Irvine locate these articles in relation to ongoing debates in linguistic anthropology, as contributions that, individually and together, suggest approaches to questions of long-standing interest by bringing newer ones to light.

References Cited

Agha, Asif

In press *Language and Social Relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bakhtin, Mikhail M.

1981 *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Michael Holquist, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, trans. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Goffman, Erving

1974 *Frame Analysis*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

1983 *The Interaction Order*. *American Sociological Review* 48:1–17.

Hymes, Dell

1974 *Foundations in Sociolinguistics*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Jakobson, Roman

1960 *Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics*. In *Style in Language*. Thomas Sebeok, ed. Pp. 360–377. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Peirce, Charles Sanders

1931–1959 *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*. 8 vols. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss, eds. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.