Living Language: An Introduction to Linguistic Anthropology
By Laura Ahearn

Reviewed by Yasin Khoshhal, University of Guilan, Rasht, Iran

Abstract

This paper reviews the book Living Language: An Introduction to Linguistic Anthropology which is a distinct and almost flawless study of the essential theoretical disputes in linguistic anthropology and an accessible and easy-to-use reference for students pursuing the study of linguistic forms in real-life contexts around the world. Merging classic studies on language in social context and pioneering modern scholarship, Ahearn offers a uniting synthesis of research in linguistic anthropology and seeks future research in this field. The book, Living Language, treats language as indistinguishably twisted with cultural and social relations and merges theory with instances of modern language use to study the process that language makes, sustains, experiments, and how language changes social chains. This book tries to address the relationship between language and different cultures, ethnicities, people and the usage of language in different contexts.

Keywords: linguistic anthropology, anthropology, literature, linguistics

The Socially Charged Life of Language

Bakhtin says that every single word has the "taste" of a particular concept; such as a person, a day and so on. The author wants to support that language is a group of socially rooted observations when she adds "every social interaction is mediated by language" (Ahearn 2011, p. 3).

As the author mentions, the main goal of this book is to indicate how the position and usage of linguistic anthropology not only can take social and cultural issues into consideration but also would deepen our understanding of language and, therefore, ourselves.

Ahearn believes that language per se is naturally a social notion. It does not necessarily furnish us with the way we act upon the world but speech itself is a type of social action and language is a cultural source for all people around the world to make use of (Duranti, 1997, p. 2). As the author adds, both language and context are two integrated concepts and as she claims "contexts and linguistic practices mutually constitute each other" (Ahearn, 2011, p. 8). In line with what Alessandro Duranti (1997) states, language should be investigated "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" (p. 1).

The author then compares two approaches supported by Reddy and Ferdinand de Saussure (1986). An approach in which language is decreased to a group of formal conventional rules. As Saussure claimed "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, p. 14). There seemed to be some contrast between Chomsky's ideas and other linguists in this field but as Duranti says it was not a matter of being uninterested in the field of grammar; rather, they seek for the answer to various types of questions which tend to establish a connection between structural forms and social relations. Based on the definition given by linguistic anthropologists, grammar is merely one aspect of the language's "socially charged life" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 293).

So, What Do You Need to Know in Order to "Know" a Language?

The author compares the dichotomy of competence, as the unconscious knowledge every individual possesses of rules of a language, and performance, as the ability of using this knowledge is usually made use of by the Linguists, to "Langue" and "Parole" as proposed by Saussure and claims that both these two linguists emphasized the competence or Langue. Five basic aspects of a language, according to Cipollone et al. (1998) are Phonology, Morphology, Syntax, Semantics. and Pragmatics. Linguistic anthropologists, in contrast to most of the linguists such as Chomsky, considered all these five in studying a language (pp. 8-11).

So, How Do Linguistic Anthropologists Study Language as Social Action?

Ahearn tries to illuminate different cultural meanings that are interrelated with language use. She notes that various ethnographers such as Keith Basso, Marjorie Harness Goodwin, Bonnie Urciuoli, etc. have tried to pinpoint the two following issues:

1. Language must be investigated with regard to social actions or cultural norms.
2. Seek the answer to the questions about social connections and cultural factors by investigating the language meticulously.

Key Terms in Linguistic Anthropology

As Ahearn (2012) believes "Multifunctionality, language ideologies, practice, and indexicality are four key terms that provide insight into the socially embedded nature of language" and that dimension of life which is linguistically rooted (p. 17).

Multifunctionality

Language is seen as a means to explain what happens or to encode ideas or objects. Linguistic anthropologists make use of the terminology "multifunctional" when they want to refer to various types of functions that the language can perform.

Language ideologies

Based on Ahearn (2012) "language ideologies are the attitudes, opinions, beliefs, or theories that we all have about language" (p. 21). In most of the cases language ideologies cover many more aspects than merely the language itself. Language ideologies are also known as linguistic ideologies which are concepts that are essentially made use of in anthropology, sociolinguistics, and cross-cultural investigations to shape groups of feelings about the language when they are used in the world.

Practice

"Practice," Ortner (1989) asserts, "emerges from structure, it reproduces structure, and it has the capacity to transform structure" (p. 12). Practice theorists seek to investigate concepts about social reproduction and transformation. Practice theory can be defined as a theory of the way in which social unities, with their distinguishable motives and intentions, create and modify the world around themselves. The main concept of practice theory is that linguistic structures and social actions are restricted to human notions which can build, rebuild, or reprogram those structures and at the same time each structure can give rise to the other.

Indexicality

"Indexicality" (Hanks 1999) is originally rooted in Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotics (Peirce, 1955; cf. Mertz, 2007). The best well-known definition is Saussure's signifier-signified concept. For example, "I" refers to the speaker; "now" refers to the date on which that word is pronounced; and "here" refers to the location of the utterance. For Peirce, however, semiotics, or meaning-making through signs, involves a concept of the linguistic sign that is quite different from de Saussure's, for it is a process that "involves three components: signs (whatever stands for something else), objects (whatever a sign stands for), and interpretants (whatever a sign creates insofar as it stands for an object)" (Kockelman, 2007, p. 376). There are three ways that a sign can be linked to its object, according to Peirce and those are Icon, Index, and Symbol.

The Inseparability of Language, Culture, and Social Relations

The linguistic anthropology field offers some tools to gain a better understanding of these phenomena—linguistic, cultural, and social.

The Research Process in Linguistic anthropology

The main question that is going to be answered is "How do linguistic anthropologists actually go about conducting research?"

What Kinds of Research Questions Do Linguistic Anthropologists Formulate?

Sometimes questions that initiate the inquiry are rather rudimentary in the mind of the researcher; other times, they are clearly defined in the grant proposals.

As Ahearn writes "many linguistic anthropologists conduct long-term fieldwork, often in very different cultural and linguistic settings than the researcher's own, and such fieldwork ends up challenging the researcher's initial assumptions" (Ahearn, 2012, p. 22).

What Kinds of Data Do Linguistic Anthropologists Collect, and with What Methods?

Linguistic anthropologists inspired an eclectic mix of research methods, quantitative or qualitative—or often both. Many linguistic anthropologists advocate the use of several methods to collect different types of data in an attempt to obtain a more complete picture of the phenomenon under study. Participant observation, interviews, surveys and questionnaires, conversations that occur naturally, experimental methods, tests matched Guise of written texts are some of the most commonly used methods.

How Do Linguistic Anthropologists Analyze their Data?

Logistics involved in research in linguistic anthropology can be very difficult. Many researchers attract research assistants to help them collect data, whether the conduct of an investigation, dissemination of written questionnaires or translation or decryption maintenance or conversations. All researchers, including linguistic anthropologists engage in interpretation. Once the linguistic anthropologists have all their data, interpretation becomes a model research process to find the answers to the questions that inspired the research project—or answer questions that arise when analyzing data. Linguistic anthropologists collect information consisting of recorded or transcribed conversations, written notebooks, results of surveys, or other types of information; once they have the data collected—often mountains of data—the researcher is to analyze that mountain of data.

What Sorts of Ethical Issues Do Linguistic Anthropologists Face?

The American Anthropological Association has developed its own code of ethics, and many anthropologists consider these guidelines more appropriate for their research. The Code of the follows legal "informed consent" processes. The researcher must inform each research subject entirely on the nature of the study and obtain the consent of each participant. The informed consent process in such cases must be continuous and adapted to the particular context in which the research takes place.

Language Acquisition and Socialization

Caregivers socialize their children to become very different kinds of social individuals through culturally particular uses of language. Linguistic anthropology stands for a unique view of children's language acquisition.

Language Acquisition and the Socialization Process

Many linguists follow Noam Chomsky, who considers environmental influences, social or other, on the acquisition of language as minimal: "Not only do Chomsky and his supporters accord the environment a very minor role in the language acquisition process; they also believe

that language arises out of a separate domain-specific faculty or module of the brain" (Ahearn, 2012, p. 53). The author then mentions Chomsky's ideas about poverty of stimulus and his UG approach. Cognitive scientists argue that widespread cognitive processes and development of learning mechanisms allow children to acquire language or languages in the same way they learn other advanced cognitive tasks. An individual's potential for language is the result of a specific module of language in the brain or a more general set of cognitive mechanisms. Researchers interested in language acquisition should consider the cultural values and social practices to be attached to language and its acquisition. Learning a first language and becoming a culturally competent member of society the two sides of the same process.

Language Acquisition in Bilingual or Multilingual Contexts

According to Ahearn,

When children are exposed regularly to two or more languages (there does not seem to be an upper limit) during the developmental window period of early to middle childhood, they usually becoming fluent in all the languages available to them in their social environment. (Ahearn, 2012, p. 56)

Linguistic ideologies argue that children are somehow disadvantaged to be exposed to more than one language in early childhood.

Language Socialization throughout the Lifespan

Childhood is not the end to the acquisition of new linguistic practices. Whenever a child, adolescent or adult entering a new school, the country, the religious community, profession, or any other social group, the general process of becoming socialized into this community is largely achieved by linguistic interactions and often accompanied by learning new words and uses. Conversely, people gradually become competent members of a new community, their relationship to both written and spoken language changes often.

Language, Thought, and Culture

Some linguistic anthropologists believe that Whorf's premise shapes culture and thoughts more significantly than the way people realize. "The particular language you speak might predispose you to view the world a certain way, but it will not prevent you from challenging that view" (Ahearn, 2012, p. 66). Based on the hypothesis of Sapir-Whorf, language has the capacity to shape our thoughts and ways of living; however, linguists have very different understandings of how this occurs.

A Hundred Years of Linguistic Relativity

Some scholars have been debating whether or not people in some communities were incapable of complicated, abstract "scientific" thought because of the clear lack of "logical" grammar categories in their languages. While language spoken by a particular group of people only tended to reflect their traditional cultural practices and language may facilitate certain types of

thought and could provide a valuable means of understanding of the culture of the unconscious patterns and thought, but it would not prevent people from thinking in a way that differs from the categories more conveniently presented in their language (Boas; 1858–1942). NEED A CITATION HERE.

Unlike Boas, Sapir posited a strong impact of language on thought: "We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation" (Sapir 1949[1929], p. 162). Sapir stressed that all kinds of linguistic phrases could be decreased to a common human psychology underlying. Whorf, like Boas and Sapir, categorically opposition to researchers who examined the West, cognitive linguistics or cultural categories to be superior to all others.

The Sapir–Whorf Hypothesis

A "Strong" version of their hypothesis is based on the notions that language determines our way of thinking and different languages create different ways of thinking. This outlook, known as language determinism, was seen to be extremist, so they changed their theory into a more accurate one that the language has a crucial role in our way of thinking—known as language relativism. The second one was mostly accepted by linguists who gave a significant role to language. Although some experts such as John Lucy took over the task to formulate specific hypotheses empirically researchable arising in Boas' ideas, the scientists themselves never mounted their research using these terms on the field of science.

Investigating the Effects of Language on Thought

Some researchers oppose experimental methods preferred by these researchers because they assume the ability to distinguish linguistic and non-linguistic forms of cognition. the research emerging from many different fields over the past two decades points to unmistakable evidence that language can indeed influence thought.

Language-in-general

The principles and characteristics of language is the general vehicle of our ideas, and represents by words all the conceptions of the mind. Some types of nonhumans such as primates, lemurs, Diana monkeys, and baboons, also seem to have semantic calls and/or other forms of complex social cognition (Zuberbühler, 2000; Cheney and Seyfarth, 2007). One other possible way to investigate the influence of language is to study children who have not learned yet language. All human babies are born also able to recognize and finally produce all the sounds used in all human languages. Eventually, as adults, they will be incapable of hearing or producing many contrasts between sounds used in other languages besides their own without prolonged training.

Linguistic Structures

Researchers in this field investigate the effects of specific linguistic forms in a given language on the thought processes of speakers of that language. The existence, or lack of a particular word in a given language does not have much influence on thought. Semantic domains

are areas of human knowledge (such as politics, economics, sport) exhibiting specific terminology and lexical coherence. They have been used both in Linguistics (i.e. semantic fields) and in Lexicography (i.e. subject field codes) to mark technical usages of words.

Grammatical category is a property of items within the grammar of a language; it has a number of possible values, which are normally mutually exclusive within a given category. Examples of frequently encountered grammatical categories include tense, number, and gender.

Languages, in other words, are extremely variable and

> force quite different sets of conceptual distinctions in almost every sentence: some languages express aspect, others don't; some have seven tenses, some have none; some force marking of visibility or honorific status of each noun phrase in a sentence, others don't; and so on and so forth. (Levinson, 2003:29)

Color

The semantic field of color terms was studied over 50 years, with researchers drawing conflicting conclusions regarding the universality and variability of color perception and terminology. However, in the most recent Universalist theory, Kay (2005) acknowledges that all languages even have a semantic domain for color—it's not "partition perceptual color space" linguistically. The specific language you speak can indeed affect, at least for borderline cases, your color perception—or at least your performance on experimental tasks designed to test your color perception.

Space

Another domain of human experience that has been tested for Whorfian effects is space.

Shape vs. material composition

Aside from space, two other aspects of the physical world, an object of shape and composition are important, providing further evidence that the way we perceive and categorize the things around us can be influenced by the including language we speak.

Language Use

Our thought process could be affected not only by speaking the language in general or because specific semantic or grammatical structures of our own language, but because of the social models of everyday use of the language. In addition, however, it is also important to note that social and cultural factors almost certainly influenced the development language "technostrategic" to begin to unravel language, thought, and culture of each other in such cases proves almost impossible.

Final comment

The book is full of practical examples from different nations, cultures and ethnicities. This particular feature of the book makes it meritorious. It does well to keep in mind that most

readers may not be familiar with some of the sets taken for granted in linguistic anthropology terms, and then explains each new term or concept is presented in a comprehensible way. Another element that makes it a user-friendly book is the comfortable style through which the author communicates with readers and the vivid descriptions and examples from real life and presented stories.

References

Ahearn, L.M. (2001b). *Language and agency*. Annual Review of Anthropology 30:109–137.

Ahearn, L.M. (2001a). *Invitations to Love: Literacy, Love Letters, and Social Change in Nepal*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Cheney, D.L. and Seyfarth, R.M. (2007). *Baboon Metaphysics: The Evolution of a Social Mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Cipollone, N., Keiser, S.H., and Vasishth, S. (1998). *What do you know when you know a language? In Language Files: Materials for an Introduction to Language and Linguistics*.7th ed. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.

Cohn, C. (1987). *Sex and death in the rational world of defense intellectuals*. Signs 12(4): 687–718.

Duranti, A. (Ed.). (2001). *Linguistic anthropology: A reader.* Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell.

Duranti, A. (1997). *Linguistic Anthropology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gentner, D. and Goldin-Meadow, S. (2003). *Whither Whorf. Language in Mind: Advances in the Study of Language and Thought*. Cambridge: MA: MIT Press. 3–14.

Hanks, W.F. (1996). *Language and Communicative Practices*. Boulder, CO: Westview.

Hanks, W.F. (1999). *Indexicality*. Journal of Linguistic Anthropology 9(1–2): 124–126.

Kay, P. (2005). Color categories are not arbitrary. *Cross-Cultural Research.* 39(1):39–55.

Kockelman, P. (2007). *Agency: the relation between meaning, power, and knowledge*. Current Anthropology 48(3):375–401.

Leslie, A.M. (2001). *Theory of mind. In Smelser, N.J. and Baltes, P.B. (eds.), International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*. New York: Elsevier. 15652–15656

Levinson, S.C. (2003). *Language and mind: let's get the issues straight!* In Gentner, D. and Goldin-Meadow, S. (eds.), Language in Mind: Advances in the Study of Language and Thought. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. 25–46.

Ochs, E. (1988). *Culture and Language Development: Language Acquisition and Language Socialization in a Samoan Village*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ortner, S.B. (1989). *High Religion: A Cultural and Political History of Sherpa Buddhism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Ortner, S.B. (2006a). *Introduction: Updating practice theory*. In Ortner, S.B., Anthropology and Social Theory: Culture, Power, and the Acting Subject. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, pp. 1–18.

Peirce, C.S. (1955). *Philosophical Writings of Peirce, ed. J. Buchler*. New York: Dover

Zuberbühler, K. (2000). *Referential labeling in Diana monkeys*. Animal Behavior 59:917–927.

Yasin Khoshhal is a doctoral candidate in the Department of English Language and Literature at the University of Guilan, Rasht, Iran.