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Defining language and culture

A sociocultural perspective on language and culture

This chapter:

- describes current perspectives on the nature of language and culture in the field of applied linguistics;
- traces the lineage of some of the more significant assumptions on which current understandings are based;
- offers a list of additional readings on the topics covered in this chapter.

1.1 Introduction

Few would disagree that the study of language use is the central concern of applied linguistics, but opinions differ in how such study is to be conceptualised. Some have argued (see, for example, Pennycook, 2001, and Widdowson, 2000) that, until recently, much of what has taken place in applied linguistics is better understood as ‘linguistics applied’, a subset of the field of linguistics in which knowledge about language is used to address language-related concerns such as language teaching and language policy decisions. From the ‘linguistics applied’ perspective, language is considered to be a set of abstract systems whose meanings reside in the forms themselves rather than in the uses to which they are put. The contexts from which data are taken are considered useful places from which to locate and extract linguistic elements. But, at the same time, they are treated as ancillary to the analysis.

Investigations taking a ‘linguistics applied’ approach involve overlaying linguistic forms on instances of language use and interpreting their meanings in light of the structural frameworks. That is, concern is not with the concrete act of using language but rather with the forms themselves as objects of analysis in their own right. As Widdowson (2000: 22) notes: ‘The

process whereby these forms interrelate co-textually with each other and contextually with the circumstances of their use is left largely unexplored.’

Quote 1.1 On the nature of *linguistics applied*

So long as linguistics was defined along traditional and formal lines, as the study of abstract systems of knowledge idealized out of language as actually experienced, the task of applied linguistics seemed relatively straightforward. It was to refer such abstract analysis of idealized internalized I-language back to the real world to find ways in which externalized E-language could be reformulated so as to make it amenable to benevolent intervention.

Widdowson (2000: 4)

In recent years, as concerns with the limitations of this approach for understanding language experiences have grown, the field of applied linguistics has become far more interdisciplinary, extending its purview to other disciplines, such as communication, cultural psychology, linguistic anthropology, linguistic philosophy and social theory, in search of new ways to address concerns with language use. These explorations have been fruitful, yielding theoretical and methodological insights into the nature of applied linguistics activity that differ fairly substantially from those embodied in the more traditional ‘linguistics applied’ approach typical of earlier applied linguistics research.

Current views consider the fundamental concern to be the ‘pragmatically motivated study’ (Bygate, 2005: 571) of social action – the use of language in real-world circumstances – with the dual goal of advancing our understanding of how language is used to construct our sociocultural worlds and using this understanding to improve our worlds. Analytic primacy is not language *per se*, but the ways in which language is used in the accomplishment of social life. Central to the transformation of applied linguistics activity is the reconceptualisation of two concepts, *language* and *culture*, considered fundamental to the task. While current understandings of these concepts derive from an assortment of scholarly interests, they are bound together by a sociocultural perspective on human action. We look more closely at some of the more significant assumptions embodied in this perspective in the following sections.

1.2 Language as sociocultural resource

A sociocultural perspective on human action locates the essence of social life in communication. Through our use of linguistic symbols with others,

we establish goals, negotiate the means to reach them, and reconceptualise those we have set. At the same time, we articulate and manage our individual identities, our interpersonal relationships, and memberships in our social groups and communities.

A great deal of research on communication makes it apparent that much of what we do when we communicate is conventionalised. In going about our everyday business, we participate in a multiplicity of recurring communicative activities in which the goals, our roles, and the language we use as we play these roles and attempt to accomplish the goals, are familiar to us. On a daily basis, we give and take orders, request help, commiserate, chat with friends, deliberate, negotiate, gossip, seek advice and so on. We participate in such routine activities with relative ease and can easily distinguish one activity from other. For example, we can usually tell when the utterance 'What are you doing?' is meant as a prelude to an invitation and when it is meant as a reproach. Likewise, if we hear the utterance 'That's a great pair of shoes', we can anticipate with some accuracy the communicative event that is taking place, and construct an appropriate response.

The knowledge we use to help us navigate through our communicative activities comprises sets of **communicative plans**, that is to say, 'socially constructed models for solutions of communicative problems' (Luckmann, 1995: 181). These plans lay out for us the expected or typical goals of an activity, the typical trajectories of social actions and the prosodic, linguistic and interactional resources comprising the actions by which such goals are realised. They also lay out the role relationships that are likely to obtain among those involved in the activity. The plans are constructed and shared by the members of the sociocultural groups to which we belong, and are maintained and modified in our uses of them as we engage in the activities constituting our daily lives. Because we share the plans with other members of our sociocultural groups and communities, they provide some common ground for knowing what we can each appropriately, or conventionally, say and do. In other words, the plans help us to synchronise our actions and interpretations with others and to reach a mutual understanding of what is going on (cf. Levinson, 2006b; Luckmann, 1995). It is through such everyday, conventionalised communicative activities, or **language games** (Wittgenstein, 1963), that we experience the world. Thus, they constitute dynamic, vital forms of life.

In this view of language as social action, language is considered to be first and foremost a sociocultural resource constituted by 'a range of possibilities, an open-ended set of options in behaviour that are available to the individual in his existence as social man' (Halliday, 1973: 49). Options for taking action in our communicative activities include a wide array of linguistic resources such as lexical and grammatical elements, speech acts and rhetorical structures, and in the case of oral language use, structured

patterns for taking turns and phonological, prosodic and paralinguistic resources such as intonation, stress, tempo and pausing.

Concept 1.1 **Ludwig Wittgenstein's notion of *language games***

The term **language games** is commonly attributed to the Austrian philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein, whose views on language are best captured in *Philosophical Investigations* (1963). According to Wittgenstein, language games are established, conventionalised patterns of communicative action. These patterns, which are agreed upon and shared by members of a culture group, embody particular definitions of the situation and meanings of possible actions and, more generally, particular ways of knowing, valuing and experiencing the world.

More formalist views of language consider these resources to be fixed, invariant forms that we take from stable, bounded structural systems. In contrast, a sociocultural perspective considers them to be fundamentally social, their essence tied to their habits of use. That is, rather than a prerequisite to individual use, the shape or structure of our resources is an emergent property of them, developing from the resources' locally situated uses in activity. Structures, then, do not precede use, but arise as a consequence of use.

This view is captured most clearly in the notion of **emergent grammar**, originally proposed by Paul Hopper (Hopper, 1987; Hopper and Thompson, 1993). According to Hopper, rather than being fixed units enabling communication, language structures are more appropriately understood as dynamic, mutable by-products of it. It is through their frequent, routinised uses in specific sociocultural contexts that the symbolic means by which we take action develop into 'a minimally sorted and organized set of memories of what people have heard and repeated over a lifetime of language use, a set of forms, patterns, and practices that have arisen to serve the most recurrent functions that speakers find need to fulfill' (Ford *et al.*, 2003: 122).

At the same time, while the various shapes of our linguistic resources develop from past uses, the specific forms they take at particular points in time are open to negotiation. However, the degree of negotiation that is possible at any communicative moment is dependent on at least two factors: the frequency of the resources' past uses and the amount of institutional force behind them. The more frequently the linguistic resources are used, or the more institutional force there is behind their use, the more systematised or codified their shapes become. The more systematised the resources are, the more invisible their sociohistorical roots are. The system is then treated as if it had a life of its own, existing apart from any context of use, and apart

from its users. Any individual language use becomes measured against this universal yardstick with the assumption that there is an inherent correctness to the shape the forms take.

Quote 1.2 Emergent Grammar

The notion of *Emergent Grammar* is meant to suggest that structure, or regularity, comes out of discourse and is shaped by discourse as much as it shapes discourse in an on-going process. Grammar is hence not to be understood as a prerequisite for discourse, a prior possession attributable in identical form to both speaker and hearer. Its forms are not fixed templates, but are negotiable in face-to-face interaction in ways that reflect the individual speaker's past experience of these forms, and their assessment of the present context, including especially their interlocutors, whose experiences and assessments may be quite different.

Hopper (1987: 142)

1.2.1 Dialogue as the essence of language use

As the structures of our linguistic resources emerge from their real-world uses, so do their meanings. That is, the linguistic resources we choose to use do not come to us as empty forms ready to be filled with our personal intentions; rather, they come to us with meanings already embedded within them. These meanings, however, are not derived from some universal, logical set of principles; rather, as with their shapes, they are built up over time from their past uses in particular contexts by particular groups of participants in the accomplishment of particular goals that, in turn, are shaped by myriad cultural, historical and institutional forces.

The linguistic resources we choose to use at particular communicative moments come to these moments with their conventionalised histories of meaning. It is their conventionality that binds us to some degree to particular ways of realising our collective history. However, while our resources come with histories of meanings, *how they come to mean* at a particular communicative moment is always open to negotiation.

Thus, in our individual uses of our linguistic resources we accomplish two actions simultaneously. We create their typical – historical – contexts of use and at the same time we position ourselves in relation to these contexts. Our locally situated uses of our linguistic resources are what Bakhtin (1981, 1986, 1990) calls **utterances**, double-sided acts, which respond to the conditions of the moment and anticipate what is to come. It is in our utterances that we fill the linguistic resources with our own voices, negotiating their conventional meanings in light of the communicative task at hand. Together

their conventional meanings and our uses of them exist as inseparable parts of a **dialogue**, and are in a continually negotiated state of ‘intense and essential axiological interaction’ (Bakhtin, 1990: 10).

Concepts 1.2 and 1.3 **Mikhail Bakhtin’s notions of dialogue and translinguistics**

The concepts of **dialogue** and **translinguistics** are central to the linguistic philosophy of the Russian linguist Mikhail Bakhtin. According to Bakhtin, meaning is located neither solely in our linguistic resources nor in each individual’s mind. Rather, it resides in between these two interdependent spheres, in the interaction, the dialogue, that is realised in our lived moments of social action. Translinguistics is the name Bakhtin gives to the study of the dialogue obtaining between our linguistic resources and the ways in which we use them to respond to real-world circumstances. Of particular significance in translanguistics, Bakhtin argues, is the study of our everyday, mundane communicative actions, since they are the source of individual innovation and social change.

From this perspective, then, the meaning of language does not reside in the system of linguistic resources removed from their contexts of use and communities of users. Nor does it reside in our individual use of them as we engage in activities particular to our sociocultural worlds. Rather, language meaning is located in the dialogic relationship between the historical and the present, between the social and the individual. We come to understand the conventional meanings of the resources only in terms of how they are used at particular moments of time. Conversely, our understandings of the concrete, here and now uses of language are developed only in terms of the positioning of the resources against their conventional. Bakhtin’s notion of **dialogicality** captures well this relational character of meaning.

Quote 1.3 The relation between language use and meaning

There are no ‘neutral’ words and forms – words and forms that belong to ‘no one’; language has been completely taken over, shot through with intentions and accents. For any individual consciousness living in it, language is not an abstract system of normative forms but rather a concrete heteroglot conception of the world. 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; all words and forms are populated by intentions.

Bakhtin (1981: 293)

The excerpt below, taken from Hall (1993a: 209), illustrates the dialogic, or relational, nature of meaning.

Husband: Take these shirts to the cleaners tomorrow, will you?

Wife: (*stands and gives military salute by raising hand to forehead*) Yes, sir.

As noted by Hall, the military salute and verbal utterance used by the wife to respond to her husband's request are typically used together in a military context by someone in a subordinate position to mark the other as a superior. If we bring their expected meanings to this context, we may conclude that the woman is using them to create a similar military-style, hierarchical relationship with her husband and thereby mark or index her understanding of this subordinate position. Alternatively, she can be using the conventional meaning of the salute and verbal utterance not to recreate their conventional context of use, and her role in it, but to mark her stance towards an utterance that she considers inappropriate. It might be, for example, that she hears the utterance as a directive instead of a request. She may regard a request as more suitable to the situation, and so uses the salute and verbal response to convey at the same time both her interpretation of her husband's utterance and her offense towards it.

Either way, there is a dialogue between the meaning conventionally associated with the salute and verbal response and their use by the woman in this particular communicative moment. Only by examining the dialogue obtaining between the conventional meanings of the linguistic resources used by the husband and wife, and their uses of them at this particular time, can we derive a full understanding of the activity – of the shapes and meanings deriving from the locally situated uses of the resources, of the participants and their relationships to each other, and of how each views his or her place within that particular communicative moment – and of the role that language plays in constructing one's social worlds.

In positing dialogue as the core of language study and the utterance as the fundamental unit of analysis, Bakhtin erases any *a priori* distinction between form and meaning, between individual and social uses of language. Just as no linguistic resource can be understood apart from its contexts of use, no single utterance can be considered a purely individual act, 'a completely free combination of forms of language' (Bakhtin, 1986: 81), whose meanings are created on the spot. Rather, it can only be understood fully by considering its history of use by other people, in other places, for other reasons. Thus, rather than being considered extraneous to the study of language, dialogue in its encounter between historical meaning and individual motivations at a particular moment of action is considered its essence.

1.2.2 Single- and double-voiced utterances

Important to understanding this dialogic relationship obtaining between the personal and social meanings embodied in our language use is the degree of authority attached to the conventional meanings of our linguistic resources. As we noted previously, our linguistic resources come to us already laden with meanings that have been developed in their histories of use. These histories of meanings determine in part the degree of force that our voices will have in using the resources towards our own ends.

Useful for understanding the links between the historical meanings of our resources and our individual uses of them are Bakhtin's concepts of **single-voiced utterances** and **double-voiced utterances** (Bakhtin, 1981; Morson and Emerson, 1990). According to Bakhtin, single-voiced utterances consist of resources whose meanings are unquestioned, non-negotiable and thus resistant to change. The more institutionalised the meanings of the resources, the more authoritative their voices are likely to be. The more authoritative their voices, the more invisible their histories become, and the more resistant they are to individually motivated innovations. Instead, the resources take on a life of their own, and become defined as a distinct, internally coherent, logical system of meanings and values. When we use the resources to take action in our worlds, they come not only with their authoritative, decontextualised meanings, but their values as well. As their users, we become defined by the values thought to be inherent within them.

For example, cross-cultural research has shown that although the pattern of turn-taking across languages is universally constructed as one-speaker-at-a-time, there are in fact slight differences in gap length between turns across languages. These differences lead to subjective perceptions 'of dramatic or even fundamental differences' (Stivers *et al.*, 2009: 10587) of those whose turn transition timing is different from the mainstream. Even very slight variations to the timing of turns can lead to perceptions of the turn takers as 'quiet' or 'noisy', and even 'rude' and 'uneducated'. Similar stigmatised evaluations are made of users of other linguistic resources that are considered different from mainstream use.

What is invisible is the fact that such institutionalised versions of linguistic resources are social facts, 'not inherent and universal, but local, secondary, and projected' (Hymes, 1980: 112). In other words, mainstream uses of linguistic resources, and the values associated with them, are the construction of particular groups who historically have had a considerable amount of sociopolitical authority behind them. It is their unquestioned use over time by groups with such authority by which resource meanings are institutionalised. In addition to propagation of the resources through their continued and unquestioned use by such groups, written documents such as dictionaries, grammar books, style manuals and etiquette guides serve as primary means for institutionalising resource meanings.

Concepts 1.4 and 1.5 **Single- and double-voiced utterances**

According to Bakhtin, **single-voiced utterances** are those with authority, those whose sociohistorical meanings are invisible to the speaker. The individual speaks as if the words she uses had a life of their own apart from any context of use. In contrast, in **double-voiced utterances** the sociohistorical meanings of words are visible to the speaker, and she can choose to use the words in two ways. In **passive double-voiced utterances**, the individual chooses to use the words as others before her have used them, that is, with their conventional meanings. In **active double-voiced utterances**, the individual uses the words not as they are meant to be used, but for her own purposes. That is, she uses the conventional meanings in such a way as to assert her own voice in their use.

It is not the case, however, that the meanings of our resources always go unquestioned. Rather, we often make conscious choices about the language we use and, in so doing, we decide on ‘a particular way of entering the world and a particular way of sustaining relationships with others’ (Duranti, 1997: 46). Utterances in which we acknowledge the conventional meanings of our resources, and use them with volition to respond to the conditions of the moment, are what Bakhtin calls **double-voiced utterances**. On the one hand, we can consciously choose to use the conventional meanings associated with the resources in predictable ways; that is, we use our resources in such a way as to create their typical contexts of use. If we come across an individual in a public area, for example, and we wish to establish some kind of interpersonal contact with that person, we can create such a context with the utterance ‘Hi, how are you today?’ This utterance is typically associated with a greeting among friends or acquaintances and its use at that time with that person helps to create such a context. Bakhtin calls these **passive double-voiced utterances**.

We can also choose to use our resources in unexpected ways. Bakhtin calls these **active double-voiced utterances**. In such utterances, we use our resources not so much to create the particular set of conditions typical of them, as to use their histories of meaning to create our unique positioning towards a particular communicative moment. The following, taken from a public billboard displayed shortly after the acts of terrorism experienced by the USA in New York City and Washington, DC in autumn 2001, is an example of an active double-voiced utterance.

Don't make me have to come down there.
– God

For many social groups, the utterance ‘Don’t make me have to come down there’ evokes a typical role-relationship between a parent and a child, and a typical situation in which one or some children are misbehaving. The utterance by the parent serves to admonish the children for their behaviour. While the consequences for ignoring the warning are not stated, it is implied that they will be dire if the actions do not stop. In the billboard message, the attribution of the utterance to a divine being, believed by many to be the supreme protector of all humanity, evokes a similar context of use. In this case, the utterance ascribes to God the role of scolding parent to a world filled with badly behaved children. One does not have to be a believer in the existence of a higher presence to appreciate how the conventional meanings embedded in language can be used to create a unique stance towards any locally situated communicative moment. It is important to note that what makes an utterance passive or active depends not just on the user’s intentions. It also includes the response it engenders, the relationships existing among the particular participants and the history of intentions embedded in the resources themselves.

Quote 1.4 The nature of voice

Each large and creative verbal whole is a very complex and multifaceted system of relations . . . there are no voiceless words that belong to no one. Each word contains voices that are sometimes infinitely distant, unnamed, almost impersonal, almost undetectable, and voices resounding nearby and simultaneously.

Bakhtin (1986: 124)

In sum, in a sociocultural perspective on human action, language is viewed at one and the same time as both an individual tool and a socio-cultural resource, whose use on a day-to-day basis is conventionalised, shaped by the myriad intellectual and practical communicative activities that constitute our daily lives. In using language to participate in our activities, we reflect our understanding of them and their larger cultural contexts and, at the same time, create spaces for ourselves as individuals within them. The meanings that our individual uses of language assume at those moments draw from their historical, conventional meanings in relation to their situated, immediate contexts of use. Hence, different uses of language embody different meanings.

This perspective rejects the idea that literal or decontextualised meaning exists apart from the use of a linguistic resource. There is no word, no use of a resource that can be considered unprejudiced, independent of its users or contexts of use. Instead, our words come to us already used, filled with

the evaluations and perceptions of others. Their meanings emerge from the juxtaposition of their past uses with our locally situated uses of them in the present. Thus, when we use language to act in our social worlds, it cannot be said that we ‘use our own words’. Rather, in our actions we make use of available meaning-laden resources to construct our worlds as we would have them be at that moment.

Wittgenstein (1963: 12) captures the contextualised character of our linguistic resources when he states: ‘If you do not keep the multiplicity of language-games in view you will perhaps be inclined to ask questions like: “What is a question?” – Is it the statement that I do not know such-and-such, or the statement that I wish the other person would tell me . . . ? Or is it the description of my mental state of uncertainty?’ Here, in linking language meaning to its contexts of use, Wittgenstein makes apparent the interdependence of meaning in the here-and-now and historical meaning, of individual meaning and meaning based in community. ‘Not what one is doing now, but the whole hurly-burly, is the background against which we see an action, and it determines our judgment, our concepts and our reactions’ (Wittgenstein, 1980, no. 629).

One final point needs to be made. As noted earlier, there is nothing essential to our linguistic resources themselves that makes their meanings more privileged or authoritative. Rather, their authority develops from their past uses. It follows then that language is inherently ideological. As Bakhtin argues, in the language we choose to use at any particular moment we make visible our attitudes and beliefs towards the communicative moment, towards those with whom we are communicating, and towards what we believe our social positioning is within our sociocultural worlds. Only by examining our language use at particular moments of time in relation to its history can we reveal the varied ways in which we create our voices in response to the larger social and political forces shaping our worlds.

1.3 Culture as sociocultural practice

The notion of culture has always been considered an important concept in applied linguistics. However, in studies taking a more traditional ‘linguistics applied’ approach it is often treated as its own logical system of representational knowledge, located in the individual mind, and existing independent of language, when it is treated at all. The basis of the system is assumed to be an abstract, universal structure for organising and generating the knowledge. When exposed to culture-specific data, provided by the physical world, the mind is thought to generate systems of knowledge that are specific to a particular culture group. Hence, while the underlying formal structures of culture are assumed to be universal, the

actual substance generated by the formal structures is considered to be fairly homogeneous static bodies of knowledge consisting of accumulated and classifiable sets of thoughts, feelings, values and beliefs. By virtue of their group membership, and their innate possession of the formal structures needed to process culture-specific data, individual members are assumed to have full and equal possession of these sets of knowledge. Thus, any pattern detected across individuals is automatically assumed to reflect their cultural affiliations (cf. Sarangi, 1994).

In addition to an assumption of cultural homogeneity, the more traditional perspective assumes knowledge acquisition to be unidirectional, transmitted by, but fundamentally unrelated to, language. That is, while language may be used as a way to uncover the culture-specific bodies of knowledge, it is not deemed to have any influence on their development or, more generally, on the abstract structures by which the information is organised. Thus, the primary, if not only, role that language is thought to play is representational. In other words, language can only *reflect* cultural understandings; it can not *affect* them (Goodenough, 1964; cf. Williams, 1992).

A sociocultural perspective of culture stands in marked contrast to this more traditional view. Rather than viewing culture as systems of fixed bodies of knowledge possessed equally by all members of well-defined culture groups, current understandings view it as ‘recurrent and habitual systems of dispositions and expectations’ (Duranti, 1997: 45). More concretely, culture is seen to reside in the meanings and shapes that our linguistic resources have accumulated from their past uses and with which we approach and work through our communicative activities. As noted earlier, in our activities with others, we rely on these expectations to make sense of the moment and work towards the accomplishment of our communicative goals.

Because we are members of multiple groups and communities, we take on and negotiate multiple cultural identities, and in our roles, participate in myriad cultural activities. At any communicative moment, through our linguistic actions, we choose particular ways to construe our worlds, to induce others to see our worlds in these ways, as we create and sustain particular kinds of relationships with them and thus make relevant some as opposed to other identities.

Quote 1.5 Culture as embodied action

In fact, there is not much point in trying to say what culture is. What can be done, however, is to say what culture does. For what culture does is precisely the work of defining words, ideas, things and groups. We all live our lives in terms of definition, names and categories that culture creates. The job of studying culture is not of finding and then accepting its definitions but of

discovering how and what definitions are made, under what circumstances and for what reasons. . . . Culture is an active process of meaning making and contest over definition, including its own definition. This, then, is what I mean by arguing that *Culture is a verb*.

Street (1993b: 25; emphasis in the original)

To locate culture one must look not in individual mind, as an accumulated body of unchanging knowledge, but in the dialogue, the embodied actions, ‘discursively rearticulated’ (Bhabha, 1994: 177) between individuals in particular sociocultural contexts at particular moments of time. This perspective of culture as a dynamic, vital and emergent process located in the discursive spaces *between* individuals links it inextricably to language. That is to say, language is at the same time a repository of culture and a tool by which culture is created. In making visible the mutual dependency of language and culture, current understandings overcome the analytic separation of the ‘linguistics applied’ approach. Because culture is located not in individual mind but in activity, any study of language is by necessity a study of culture.

1.4 Linguistic relativity

Current views of language and culture as mutually shaping forms of social life owe a great deal to ideas found in linguistic anthropology, and in particular, to the idea of **linguistic relativity** as found in the work of American linguistic anthropologist Edward Sapir (1985[1929]) and, more prominently, in that of his student Benjamin Whorf (1956). Sapir’s ideas came mainly from his study of different American indigenous languages, which led him to posit a dynamic relation between language and culture.

Whorf also studied Native American languages, in particular Hopi. Influenced by Sapir’s work as well by his experiences as a claims agent for an insurance company in the first half of the twentieth century, Whorf’s work on language and his ideas on linguistic relativity are encapsulated in what has come to be called the **Sapir–Whorf hypothesis**. This hypothesis proposes that patterned, structural components of specific languages regularly or habitually used by members of culture groups contain particular meanings that are systematically linked to the worldviews of the groups whose languages they are. Thus, they influence the way group members view, categorise, and in other ways think about their world. Since different culture groups speak different languages, individual worldviews are tied to the language groups to which individuals belong. To state it another way, if individual thought is shaped by language, individuals with different languages

are likely to have different understandings of the world. A significant contribution of the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis is that it links individual thought to larger, culturally based patterns of language and thus posits an interdependent relationship between language and culture.

Quote 1.6 The relationship between language and culture

Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection. The fact of the matter is the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies lie are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached.

Sapir (1985[1929]: 162)

Quote 1.7 Benjamin Whorf's view on linguistic relativity

We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds – and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds. We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significance as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way – an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language.

Whorf (1956: 213)

1.5 A socially constituted linguistics

A similar connection between language and culture can be found in the work of Dell Hymes (1962, 1964, 1971, 1972a, b, 1974), another linguistic anthropologist. Hymes developed a conceptualisation of language

as context-embedded social action in response to linguist Noam Chomsky's (1957, 1965) theory of language. In keeping with a formalist perspective, Chomsky conceptualised language as a fixed, universal property of the human mind containing internalised sets of principles from which language-specific grammatical rules could be derived, and thus describable in context-free, invariant terms.

Hymes regarded this view of language as too restrictive in that it did not, in fact could not, account for the social knowledge we rely on to produce and interpret utterances appropriate to the particular contexts in which they occur. He noted, 'it is not enough for the child to be able to produce any grammatical utterance. It would have to remain speechless if it could not decide which grammatical utterance here and now, if it could not connect utterances to their contexts of use' (Hymes, 1964: 110). It is this social knowledge, Hymes argued, that shapes and gives meaning to linguistic forms. Because involvement in the communicative activities of our everyday lives is usually with others who share our expectations, these links are often difficult to see. However, although it may be difficult to perceive their vitality, they cannot be considered insignificant to the accomplishment of our everyday lives. Thus, Hymes called for a more adequate theory of language that could account for the sociocultural knowledge that we draw on when using our linguistic resources so that they are considered structurally sound, referentially accurate and contextually appropriate within the different groups and communities to which we belong.

Quote 1.8 Socially constituted linguistics

The phrase 'socially constituted' is intended to express the view that social function gives form to the ways in which linguistic features are encountered in actual life. This being so, an adequate approach must begin by identifying social functions, and discovering the ways in which linguistic features are selected and grouped together to serve them.

Hymes (1974: 196)

1.5.1 A socially constituted approach to the study of language and culture

Arguing for a **socially constituted linguistics** in which social function is treated as the source from which linguistic features are formed, Hymes developed an approach to the study of language he called the **ethnography of speaking**. In contrast to more formal descriptions of language as inherently coherent systems, the focus of Hymes's approach is on capturing the conventional patterns of language used by members of particular sociocultural

groups as they participate in their everyday communicative activities, with the goal of such research being not to seek ‘the replication of uniformity, but the organization of diversity’ (Hornberger, 2009: 350).

A great deal of research, particularly in the fields of linguistic anthropology, communication, and education, has used this approach to investigate a wide range of communicative events and activities of many different groups and communities. These have included descriptions of the conventional patterns of language for enacting such mundane activities as service encounters (e.g. Bailey, 2000), gossiping (e.g. Brison, 1992; Hall, 1993a, b), leave-taking (e.g. Fitch, 2002), dinner-time talk (e.g. Blum-Kulka, 1997) and television talk shows (e.g. Carbaugh, 1988). Also subjects of investigation are institutional activities such as classroom teaching and learning (e.g. Cazden *et al.*, 1972; Foster, 1989), professional communication (e.g. Duchan and Kovarsky, 2005) and other workplace activities (e.g. Sarangi and Roberts, 1999).

Quote 1.9 The conceptual base of an ethnography of speaking

Now it is desirable . . . to take as a working framework: 1. the speech of a group constitutes a system; 2. speech and language vary cross-culturally in function; 3. the speech activity of a community is the primary object of attention. A descriptive grammar deals with this speech activity in one frame of reference, an ethnography of speaking in another. So (what amounts to a corollary, 3b), the latter must in fact include the former.

Hymes (1962: 42)

Concept 1.6 Ethnography of speaking

As proposed by Hymes, an **ethnography of speaking** is both a conceptual framework and a method for conducting language study. Presuming a systematic link between language use and context, this approach considers the communicative activity, or what Hymes termed the **communicative event**, a central unit of analysis. Analytic attention is given to describing the components of communicative events and the relations among them that participants make use of to engage in and make sense of their social worlds and, in turn, to link their use to the larger social, cultural, political and other institutional forces giving shape to them. More recent formulations of this approach to the study of language refer to it as **ethnography of communication** to capture a more encompassing understanding of the variety of resources, in addition to language, that are used in communication. Leeds-Hurwitz (1984) provides a useful summary of the history of both terms.

Literacy activities of various groups and communities have also been the subject of ethnographies of communication. Ahearn (2000), for example, studied the literacy practices of young Nepali women, focusing in particular on their use of love letters in courtship. Radway (1984) explored the role that reading romance novels played in the lives of a group of women. Taking more of a wide-angle ethnographic approach, McCarty and Watahomigie (1998) studied both home and school literacy activities in American Indian and Alaskan native communities. Similarly, Torres-Guzman (1998) investigated literacy activities in Puerto Rican communities, Dien (1998) looked at similar activities in Vietnamese American communities, and Barton and Hamilton (1998) explored the activities constituted in the everyday lives of a group of adults in England. More recently, Ivanič and Satchwell (2007) investigated the academic literacy practices of college-level students and how these practices interacted with literacy practices in other domains of the students' lives. Findings from these and other studies have shown that literacy activities do indeed vary, in some cases considerably, from community to community. As these groups differ – and as the social identities of the readers and writers differ within the groups – so does the value that is placed on literacy activities and the communicative conventions used to engage in them.

The differences in literacy practices notwithstanding, the principal assumption of literacy underlying the various strand of literacy studies remains the same. Literacy is defined not as 'a technology made up of a set of transferable cognitive skills, but [as] a constellation of practices' (Ivanič, 1998: 65), each made up of particular arrangements of skills and ways of reading and writing that are tied to their contexts of use. Likewise, the ethnographies share the goal of making visible the linguistic resources and communicative plans shared by group members and used to engage in their socioculturally important communicative activities. In addition to adding to our knowledge of cultural groups, studies taking an ethnography of communication approach to the study of language and culture have contributed a great deal to current educational practices. These practices are discussed more fully in Section II. Chapter 8, in Section III, provides more details on the ethnography of communication approach to the study of language and literacy practices.

1.5.2 The recent turn in studies of communicative activities

In the past decade or so, applied linguistic studies of communicative events, particularly those realised through face-to-face interaction, have moved beyond general descriptions of the linguistic resources needed to engage in them to more detailed descriptions that show the moment-to-moment interactional coordination by which the communicative context is created. This move has come about in part by the incorporation of methods for analysing

conversation developed by the discipline of **conversation analysis** (CA). CA began in the field of sociology over forty years ago as an offshoot of **ethnomethodology**, an approach to the study of social life that considers the nature and source of social order to be grounded in real-world activity rather than regulated by universal standards of rationality (Garfinkel, 1967; Heritage, 1984). That is, social order is a local achievement, mutually produced by participants as they engage in activity with each other. Asserting a fundamental role for interaction as ‘the primordial site of human sociality’ (Schegloff, 2007: 70), CA takes as its main concern the study of talk-in-interaction, and more particularly, ‘the analysis of competence which underlies ordinary social activities’ (Heritage, 2004: 241). More details on this particular approach to language study are given in Chapter 8.

For our purposes, it is sufficient to note that findings from CA-inspired studies have been useful in revealing the multitude of interactional methods such as turn-taking patterns and repair strategies that we have at our disposal for sense-making in our communicative activities. Examples of recent studies include Mori’s (2002) analysis of the resources used by a pair of university learners of Japanese to accomplish an instructional activity, Mondada’s (2004) study of the multilingual resources drawn on by participants in an international medical setting and Hellermann’s (2008) study of the social actions occurring in and around instructional tasks in an adult ESOL classroom.

In addition to drawing out the shared understandings that members rely on to make sense of each other’s actions in talk-in-interaction activities, interest has developed in uncovering the *variability* of resource use. A criticism of early ethnographies of communication noted that ethnographic descriptions of communicative events often gave the impression that individual members’ participation was always consensual, always orderly. Assuming a more dynamic understanding of community and language use, more recent studies have examined how individual members use the resources of their communicative activities to challenge the *status quo* or to reinforce particular ideologies. In terms of challenging existing conditions of language use, Hall’s study (1993c) revealed how one Dominican woman was able to manipulate the conventional opening to the activity of gossiping as practised among her peers in such a way as to positively transform the nature of her involvement in the activity. Typically, the opening of the gossiping event was signalled with the utterance ‘tengo una bomba’ (I have a bomb), the purpose of which was to inform the others that a story about the scandalous behaviour of another was about to be told. When this particular woman used it, however, what often followed was not a story about someone’s impropriety, but a humorous anecdote in which she was the central figure. Her unconventional use of the utterance to take the stage, so to speak, generated a great deal of humour among the other participants, and thus helped to raise her status within the group. At

the same time, it solidified her identity as a knowledgeable insider to her peers. In terms of reinforcing ideologies, the study by Blommaert *et al.* (2006) of three Belgian classrooms for newly settled immigrants revealed how teachers' instructional activities served to disqualify rather than to capitalise on students' uses of linguistic and literary resources that the teachers perceived to be non-standard.

As for literacy practices, the term **New Literacies Studies** has been coined to refer to studies that take a more critical stance towards practices constituted not only in educational settings but also in social and professional groups and communities outside of schools across a range of geographical contexts (for examples, see the edited volumes by Martin-Jones and Jones, 2000, and Street, 2004). The studies go beyond Hymes's basic ethnographic approach in that they seek to make visible the power relations embedded in and across the various practices, by asking '“whose literacies” are dominant and whose are marginalized or resistant' (Street, 2003: 77).

Also included in this strand of ethnographic research are studies of the multimodal literacy practices engendered by the continuing expansion of information and communication technologies. Of particular interest are the skills and strategies by which individuals use these technologies to make sense of and participate in their communities both within and across geographical boundaries. The study by Lam and Rosario-Ramos (2009) is one such example. They examined how teenaged immigrants in the United States used digital media to engage in social networking and to design and share information on local, national, and transnational events with peers and others living in their countries of origin. They found that these digitally based, multilingual literacy practices situated the youths in a 'transnational circuit of news and ideas' (p. 186) that exposed them to narratives, experiences, values, and expectations from different social communities. This exposure, in turn, helped to foster in the youths an ability to see things from multiple perspectives. The pedagogical significance of the findings from the various strands of research inspired by Hymes's ethnography of communication is discussed in Section II.

1.5.3 From linguistic relativity to sociolinguistic relativity

Without a doubt, Hymes's theory of language and his approach to the study of language use have made significant contributions to our understanding of the pragmatically based, mutually constitutive nature of language and culture. A less visible but equally significant contribution of his work is the advancement of our understanding of the concept of linguistic relativity. Like Whorf, Hymes sees language and culture as inextricably linked. However, by giving primacy to language use and function rather than linguistic code and form, Hymes transforms Whorf's notion of linguistic relativity in a

subtle but significant way. More to the point, in asserting the primacy of language as human action, the source of relativity becomes located in language *use*, not language *structure*.

Quote 1.10 The priority of *sociolinguistic relativity* relative to the notion of *linguistic relativity*

With particular regard to the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis, it is essential to notice that Whorf’s sort of linguistic relativity is secondary, and dependent upon a primary sociolinguistic relativity, that of differential engagement of languages in social life. For example, description of a language may show that it expresses certain cognitive style, perhaps implicit metaphysical assumptions. But what chances the language has to make an impress upon individuals and behavior will depend upon the degree and pattern of its admission into communicative events. . . . Peoples do not all everywhere use language to the same degree, in the same situations, or for the same things; some peoples focus upon language more than others. Such differences in the place of a language in the communicative system of a people cannot be assumed to be without influence on the depth of a language’s influence on such things as world view.

Hymes (1974: 18)

Recent crosslinguistic research in cognitive linguistics (e.g. Levinson, 2003; Slobin, 1997, 2003) provides compelling empirical support for the notion of **sociolinguistic relativity** by revealing substantive links between thought and language use. For example, differences across languages in terms of how spatial relationships are described have been linked to different cognitive styles among speakers of these languages (Majid *et al.*, 2004). Encapsulating these findings is cognitive linguist Dan Slobin’s concept, which asserts that languages afford users with preferred perspectives for encoding their lived experiences. That is, the language one uses helps shapes one’s conceptual understandings about the world. The link between language use and cognition is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3.

Quote 1.11 Thinking-for-speaking

The language or languages that we learn in childhood are not neutral coding systems of an objective reality. Rather, each one is a subjective orientation to the world of human experience, and this orientation *affects the ways in which we think while we are speaking*.

Slobin (1996, p. 91, emphasis in the original)

1.6 Systemic functional linguistics

One last source to note from which a notion of language as context-embedded social action draws is the work of British-Australian linguist Michael Halliday (1973, 1975, 1978; Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004). Like Hymes, Halliday views language not as a system of abstract, decontextualised rules but rather as fundamentally social, constituted by a set of resources for meaning-making. He thus locates the meanings of language forms in their systematic connections between the functions they play and their contexts of use. Also like Hymes, Halliday considers the essential role of a theory of language to be to explain the social foundations of the language system. Thus, his work has been concerned primarily with the development of a **systemic functional linguistics** (SFL) theory of language, the specific aim of which is the articulation of ‘the functionally organised meaning potential of the linguistic system’ (1975: 6). That is, it seeks to describe the linguistic options that are available to individuals to construct meanings in particular contexts or situations for particular purposes.

Quote 1.12 Halliday’s theory of language

The key claim in SFL is that the system itself is functionally organized to address the highly complex social need to make and exchange meaning. That is, in this perspective, the linguistic system realizes culture because it is a social semiotic modality that functions in and through social processes to enable socially constituted subjects to exchange meanings.

Williams (2008: 62)

To make these connections between language use and context visible, Halliday proposed an analytic framework consisting of a set of three inter-related functions. The first function is the **ideational**, which is concerned with the propositional or representational dimensions of language. The second is the **interpersonal**, which is concerned with the social dimensions of language, and more specifically how interpersonal connections are made and sustained. The third function is the **textual**, which is concerned with the construction of coherent and cohesive discourse. According to Halliday, all languages manage all three functions. Also part of the framework is a set of three components for describing situation types. The first component, **field**, refers to the setting and purpose. **Tenor**, the second component, pertains to the participants’ roles and relationships and the key or tone of the situation. The third component, **mode**, refers to the symbolic or rhetorical means by which the situation is realised, and the genre to which it is most appropriately related.

According to Halliday's theory, meanings of the linguistic resources used by individuals in particular situations can be linked to the conventionalised, or systematic interactions between the three components of the situation and the three language functions: field interacts with ideational, tenor with interpersonal, and mode with textual. This knowledge comprises the communicative plans with which individuals approach their communicative activities, and they use their shared understandings of a situation in terms of field, tenor and mode to anticipate the language forms and meanings likely to be used.

Quote 1.13 On the explanatory value of systemic functional linguistics

Given an adequate specification of the situation in terms of field, tenor and mode, we ought to be able to make certain predictions about the linguistic properties of the text that is associated with it: that is, about the register, the configurations of semantic options that typically feature in this environment, and hence also about the grammar and vocabulary, which are the realizations of the semantic options.

Halliday (1975: 131)

Like Hymes's approach to the study of language, SFL has engendered much empirical research. The directions taken, however, differ somewhat in that the focus of studies from the perspective of SFL is on describing functions of particular linguistic features as they are realised in a variety of texts. For example, Young and Nguyen (2002) employed SFL analytic methods to compare the linguistics features used to present a scientific topic in a 12th grade (high school) physics textbook with those in a teacher discussion of the topic. Their findings revealed some striking contrasts in how scientific meaning is constructed across the two modes.

SFL also differs from ethnographies of communication in that, although there has been some consideration of oral communicative activities, as shown in the study by Young and Miller, up until recently, much of the analytic attention has been on written genres. With the increasing recognition of the multimodal nature of literacy, and the fact that 'language alone cannot give us access to the meaning of the multimodally constituted message' (Kress, 2003: 35), contemporary SFL research has extended its analytic focus to include a range of modes such as, for example, images, gestures, and animated movements in addition to the more traditional oral and written modes. SFL as an approach to research is addressed in Chapter 8.

Despite differences in the approaches and analytic foci, findings from myriad investigations using theoretical frameworks that draw on the work

of both Hymes and Halliday make apparent in empirically interesting and compelling ways the socially constituted nature of language. Pedagogical implications of current research from these perspectives are addressed in Section II.

A last point to make is that a sociocultural perspective of language and culture does not draw the same distinction between competence and performance as the traditional Chomskyan perspective does (cf. Crowley, 1996). In the latter perspective, competence and performance are considered to be two distinct systems: the formal and the functional. A sociocultural perspective makes no such distinction. Rather it takes as fundamental the existence of one system, a system of action, in which form and meaning – knowledge and use – are two mutually constituted components.

Quote 1.14 Differences between traditional 'ahistorical' and sociocultural approaches to the study of language

... it is clear that the decontextualised, ahistorical approach to language must be called into question by a method which does not seek for an abstract structure but looks instead for the uses, and their significance, to which language is put at the micro- and macro-social levels. And this is not just a question of turning away from *langue* to *parole*, or from competence to performance, since that would be to accept the misleading alternatives on offer in the established models. The new approach would seek and analyse precisely neither abstract linguistic structure nor individual use but the institutional, political and ideological relationships between language and history. . . . In short, it would consider the modes in which language becomes important for its users not as a faculty which they all share at an abstract level, but as a practice in which they all participate in very different ways, to very different effects, under very different pressures, in their everyday lives.

Crowley (1996: 28)

1.7 Summary

Incorporation of developments in fields historically considered outside the main purview of applied linguistics has helped the field to reconceptualise two essential concepts: language and culture. In contrast to traditional views, which consider language to be structural systems transcending their users and contexts of use, sociocultural conceptualisations see language as dynamic, living collections of resources for the accomplishment of our social lives. These collections are considered central forms of life in that we use them not only to refer to, or represent, the world in our communicative

activities. They are also forms of action by which we bring our cultural worlds into existence, maintain them, and shape them for our own purposes.

Current understandings have also transformed the way we view language meaning. While we can and do use our resources to realise personal intentions, our intentions alone do not give them their meaning. Nor is meaning inherent in the forms themselves. That is to say, we cannot pull resources from their contexts, dust off any contextual residue, and then claim to know their meaning. Doing so only renders them lifeless. Instead, the meanings that reside in our linguistic resources are dynamic, emerging from the dialogic interaction between our uses of them at particular moments in time, and their conventional meanings, determined by their prior uses by other individuals, in other communicative activities, and at other times. The specific components of language then are considered to be fundamentally communicative, their shapes arising from their uses by individuals to construct and enact certain social identities as they engage in activities particular to their sociocultural worlds.

Also transformed is our understanding of what it means to know language. From a sociocultural perspective, to know language does not mean to know something *about* it. It is not a body of information about forms and meanings that we first accumulate and then use in our communicative activities. Rather, to know a language means ‘knowing how to go on, and so is an ability’ (Shotter, 1996: 299). Tying language knowledge to social action in this way makes visible its mutually dependent, inextricable link to culture. It is through the ways we live our lives, and through our social actions, that culture is made and remade.

Quote 1.15 The study of language use

We must study how, by interweaving our talk with our other actions and activities, we can first develop and sustain between us different, particular *ways* of relating ourselves to each other . . . And then, once we have a grasp of the general character of our (normative) relations both with each other and to our surroundings . . . we should turn to a study of how, as distinct individuals, we can ‘reach out’ *from within* these forms of life, so to speak, to make the myriad different kinds of contact with our surroundings *through* the various ways of making sense of such contacts our forms of life provide. Where some of the contacts we make, perhaps, can elicit new or previously unnoticed reactions and responses from us, to function as the origins of entirely new language games. And it is these fleeting, often unremarked responses that occur in the momentary gaps between people as they react to each other – from within an established form of life – that must become the primary focus for our studies here, for it is in these reactions that people reveal to each other what *their world* (their ‘inner life’) is like for them; and can also, perhaps, initiate a new practice.

Shotter (1996: 299–300; emphasis in the original)

Ultimately, then, from a sociocultural perspective on language and culture, what we pursue in our research endeavours is not a theory of linguistic systems. Neither is it a theory of universal culture. Rather, the aim is the development of a theory of social action that is centrally concerned with how we live our lives through our everyday communicative activities, through our language games. To do this requires our attention to the explication of ‘the relationships between human action, on the one hand, and the cultural, institutional, and historical situations in which this action occurs on the other’ (Wertsch *et al.*, 1995: 11). A discussion on research possibilities made possible by this perspective is taken up more fully in Section III. In the next chapter, we examine current understandings of the concept of identity and its link to language use, and in Chapter 3 we review current theoretical insights and empirical findings on language and culture learning.

Further reading

- Coiro, J., Knobel, M., Lankshear, C. and Leu, D. (eds) (2009) *Handbook of Research on New Literacies*, New York: Routledge. The aim of the volume is to provide direction to new literacies research by making visible the significant issues, theoretical perspectives and methodological frameworks guiding current research on new literacies. Chapters are written by leading scholars from such areas as social semiotics and multimodality, ethnographies of new literacies, multimedia studies, and computer-mediated communication.
- Joseph, J., Love, N. and Taylor, T. (2001) *Landmarks in Linguistic Thought II: The Western Tradition in the Twentieth Century*, London: Routledge. The text presents the contributions of key twentieth-century scholars such as Wittgenstein, Chomsky, Sapir and Whorf to the development of thinking about language and communication.
- Linell, P. (2009) *Rethinking Language, Mind, and World Dialogically*, Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing. Linell provides a comprehensive overview of dialogical theories of communication, examining topics such as self and others in the social construction of meaning, utterance, interactions and texts. Although the concepts are complex, the text is eminently accessible.
- Young, R. (2008) *Language and Interaction: An Advanced Resource Book*, London: Routledge. This book offers an up-to-date synopsis on a view of language as social action. It brings together key readings and materials to cover a range of pertinent approaches and methodologies for the study of language and interaction. It also offers a variety of tasks to help readers further develop their understandings.
- Voloshinov, V.N. (1986) *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, New York: Seminar Press. Although there is some dispute over the author of this text – some claim that the book was written by Bakhtin, others claim it was constructed as part of the ‘Bakhtin Circle’, a group of contemporaries of Bakhtin that included P.N. Medvedev and V.N. Voloshinov – the ideas presented here form a large part of the core assumptions on language and mind from a sociocultural perspective.