Pathways of sociality:
Linking contexts to each other in space and time

by

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Introduction

Stanton Wortham and Angela Reyes in their recent book (Wortham & Reyes 2015) argue that discourse analysts should extend their empirical and analytic attention beyond the dynamics of single, discrete speech events, and pay fuller attention to the “chains or pathways” that link speech events to other speech events in (social) time and space. Such chains or pathways, they suggest, “constitute a different unit of analysis, larger than individual speech events but smaller and more dynamic than macro-level sociological essentializations” (Wortham & Reyes 2015:20).

Wortham and Reyes are centrally concerned with processes like socialization, learning, and identity formation, which unfold almost entirely through people’s participation in (a series of) speech events, often with the same or similar participants, often over an extended period of time.

I want to argue here that Wortham and Reyes’s insights apply much more broadly, and that they open up areas of productive dialogue between linguistic anthropology and SFL, specifically in regard to ‘context’, ‘register’ and ‘indexicality’—key terms/concepts in both traditions, though conceptualized differently in each. My immediate point of departure is Wortham and Reyes’s observation that the pathways that indexically link speech events to other speech events provide what they call “cross-event context” (p. 21)—a notion of ‘context’ that is obviously broader than the SFL concept of ‘context of situation’ but obviously narrower than the ‘context of culture’. I am interested in the pathways themselves: How are the spatial and temporal limits of such “cross-event contexts” determined (cf. Silverstein 1992)? Which sign-forms in a given context of use are functioning both (a.) to
contextualize themselves in the immediate interactional context, and (b.) to locate the whole current context in a chain of similar occasions?

Wortham and Reyes point out that “it is true both that any discrete event of speaking can only be understood by presupposing information, models and evaluations from beyond that event and that many functions of discourse are best understood in terms of cross-event pathways” (Wortham & Reyes 2015:17; emphasis in orig.). My concern here will be to identify specific “meaningful sign-forms” (Silverstein 1985: 76-77) that occur in discrete speech events, but function in those events indexically to gesture towards, or cue, or signal the linkages between the current/ongoing ‘context of situation’ and certain others: How are these linkages established? Are there formal constraints on what kinds of forms can function in this way? Do sign-forms of different types exhibit different capabilities to do such meta-pragmatic cross-event signaling?

Wortham and Reyes argue for the importance of “discourse analysis across pathways of events, studying the linkages that allow individuals, signs, stereotypes and objects to travel across events” (p. 18). I’ll return to the metaphor of travel in my conclusion, but it is worth pointing out now that “cross-event context” is not a marginal phenomenon: individual “discrete speech-events,” I would argue, only become identifiable as such to the degree that they are “placed” in such chains or pathways. Cross-event context, then, is the real terrain of any social analysis of human communication. Indeed, “the single, discrete speech event” has no social existence at all outside the confines of a quasi-experimental ethology of human interaction—as, for example, in Conversation Analysis (CA), where it had to be invented to satisfy positivist longings for an operationalized social science in the absence of an actual laboratory.

As Reyes and Wortham show, participants make use of a range of sign types in establishing—and presuming upon—such cross-event linkages. Here I discuss how elements
of quite different formal scales can, in quite different ways, become indexical signs that “cue” participants to pathways or linkages between variously constituted heres and nows, and variously locatable theres and thens. I’ll briefly discuss three examples. First, we’ll look at a phonological variable that has served for some hundreds of years as an emblem of the stereotyped Irishman speaking English: the so-called “Irish brogue” (Moore 2007, 2011a, 2011b). Second, I’ll describe a heritage language classroom on a US Indian reservation, where the organization of turn-taking in the classroom functions itself as an indexical sign-form that establishes a pathway connecting classroom discourse to other speech events in other places within the reservation community (Moore 2016). Finally, I take up the referential use of personal names in US political discourse, showing how such referential expressions can locate two political adversaries in very different speech chains of usage (Agha 2007: 65ff).

1. The “Irish brogue” (1525-present)

In my first example the sign-vehicle that establishes a pathway across speech events is a phonological segment, more accurately a highly stereotyped sub-phonemic variant—a shibboleth, in other words. It consists of the presence in utterance tokens of the hushed sibilant [§] in positions where one might expect (or other norms might demand) a hissing sibilant, [s] or [z]. This specific shibboleth—indexing an Irishman speaking English—is attested over an almost 500-year period. That’s a lot of “single speech events,” linked to each other, with this phonological shibboleth the connecting thread. Irish English over its whole history has been bound up with a tradition of theatrical mimesis in a satirical key: the linguistic, sartorial, and behavioral emblems were formulated and reformulated in the theatre from the 17th century onward, finally congealing in the 19th century image known as “Stage Irish” (Leersen 1996). The phonological shibboleth of [§] for [s]/[z] is one of the most robust
of its vehicles.

Its first known appearance in print is also the first appearance in print of the term ‘brogue’ to denote an Irish accent—John Skelton’s spectacular and incomprehensible epic poem of 1525, *Speke, Parrot*, in which a multilingual parrot “imitates various languages and dialects, including that of the Irish water-carriers” (Hogan 1927: 56, fn. 1).

(1) “Moryshemyneowne shelf,”
    the costermonger sayth;
    “Fate, fate, fate, ye Iryshwaterlag”

Consider also the famous utterance of Captain Macmorris in Shakespeare’s *Henry V*:

(2) *II Henry V*, act 3, scene ii [1599]

**FLUELLEN**

Captain Macmorris, I think, look you, under your correction, there is not many of your nation—

**MACM**

Of my nation! What ish my nation? Ish a villain, and a bastard, and a knave, and a rascal? What ish my nation? Who talks of my nation?

Another early example provided by Bliss (1979) comes from John Crowne’s play *City Politiques* (1688), in the speech of Bartolino, “an old corrupt lawyer”:

(3) I wrong’d my shelf, choentcherinchobondsh of marriage, and cou’d not perform covenantsh. I might well hinke you wou’dchake the forfeychure of the bond, and I never found equichy in a bedg in my life. But I’ll trounce you boh! I have pav’djailshwi’ the bonesh of honester people yen you are, yat neve’ did me nor any man any wrong, but had law o’ yeirshydsh, and right o’ yeirshydsh” (Bliss 1979: 175).

In the prefaceto the print edition of the play, Crownedescribes the rigorous dialect-coachinghe gavetothe Englishactor AnthonyLeigh, who played Bartolino (Bliss 1979: 174).

The apparatus of the Stage Irishman—from phonology to bodily hexis to clothing—was fixed by the 19th century, as Leersen (1996) and others have shown. The shibboleth of [s] for [s] or [z] has survived intact from its early period when from an English *origo* it was a performable emblem of Irishness, which meant Otherness, backwardness, drunkenness, etc.
The “substitution” of [§] for [s] or [z] is only one of many characteristic features of language—spanning phonetics/phonology, syntax, and lexicon—that were “enregistered” (Agha 2004, 2007) in this way, and form part of an iconography of Stage Irishry, an ensemble of highly stereotyped elements, including simian facial figures, unkempt clothing, a weapon in the form of a rough wooden club (shillelagh), and drunkenness (see Figures 1-3).
Stage Irish
The Vienna Irish Studies & Cultural Theory Summer School 2018

Figure 1. Stage Irish [conference programme]
Figure 2: “Improvement in Irish Affairs”
Figure 3. Cooper’s Irish Dialect Readings and Recitations (1891)
Joep Leersen (1996) identifies three phases in the development of Stage Irishry: (a) in the 17th century, the Irish characters often later turn out to be Englishmen in masquerade; what’s represented is not “‘an Irishman’ but rather an English character’s idea” of what an Irishman is like” (Leersen, 1996, p. 7); (b) by the end of the 18th century, “Irishmen of unmitigated loathesomeness are represented, whilst the same time a claim to realism is raised” (Leersen, 1996, p. 7). Then, in the mid-19th century comes (c) a dramatic shift to “a more appreciative treatment” (Leersen, 1996, p. 7): “no longer a craven, heartless, dissembling enemy, he becomes noble, sentimental, forthright hero, whose loyalty to England is only rendered more striking by his Irish accent and other markers of non-Englishness”—a development “influenced to no small degree by Irish rather than English playwrights” (Leersen, 1996, p. 80).

Today, within Ireland, it survives as a robustly available shibboleth for city people to use when imitating the speech of country people. It is not uncommon in Dublin to hear people refer to the west of Ireland as the Wesht—pronouncing the name of the place in the way that the inhabitants of the place would (stereotypically) pronounce it. A Dublin colleague of mine, whose “normal” accent was a cultivated Dublin one, once summed up his report of a contentious faculty meeting by saying: I had my shpake.¹

In 2007 Miriam Lord, the Irish Times reporter who covers the houses of Parliament, observed activities in the chamber commemorating the re-election of John “The Bull” O’Donoghue as Ceann Comhairle, or Speaker of the House. She quotes the late Jackie Healy Rae (1931-2014), the South Kerry poet, publican, and politician and delivering his congratulations as follows:

(4) “Shtanding here this evening, I guarantee the Ceann Comhairle that if there is a bad pothole around Waterville, on Dursey Island in Wesht Cork or anywhere in Cahirciveen, I will do my vurrybesht

¹‘I had my speak’ (cf. the American variant ‘I had my say’). Here, of course, [š] for [s] co-occurs with a lowered vowel and the use of ‘speak’ as a noun.
to sort them out and I'll keep well informed all the time” (Irish Times, 15 June 2007, p. 11).

Jackie Healy-Rae was once described by a commentator in the Irish Times (13 May 2002) as “a stage-Irish buffoon who is a mere shillelagh away from comic perfection” (see Fig. 4).

Figure 4: Jackie Healy Rae in a 1997 campaign leaflet

Here, then, is a case of token-to-type interdiscursivity in the terminology of Silverstein (2005): producing an [§] variant where [s] or [z] would be expected can achieve a citational reference or renvoi not to any other particular (token-level) speech event, but rather to a recognizable stereotype of a person—a cited figure in Goffman’s terms (Goffman 1974: 529-534, and see the discussion in Hastings & Manning 2004: 301-304). The transition—whereby, over 400 years or so, this emblematic pronunciation shifts from being a shibboleth of Irishness (for English readers and audiences) to being a shibboleth of an uncultivated rural type of person (for contemporary Irish urbanites)—provides a nice illustration of the ‘fractal recursivity’ (as well as ‘iconization’) described by Irvine and Gal (2001). Figure 5 offers a schematic representation.

![Diagram of the “Irish brogue”]

Figure 5: The “Irish brogue”
In my second example the sign-vehicle that establishes an indexical pathway between speech-events is not an isolable form in segmental phonology but a sign of a wholly different order: the sign vehicle here is a recurring pattern in the organization of turn-taking in classroom discourse. The second example comes from a heritage language class for adults held on the Warm Springs Reservation in central Oregon. The heritage language in question is Kiksht or Wasco (Upper Chinookan), and the teachers were two elderly speakers, Mrs Thompson and Mrs McInturff, known together as “the Grandmas.” One might reasonably ask: Why two teachers?

The 12-15 adult students ranged in age from their 20s to their 50s; many were employed in Tribal or BIA administration. The class met over the lunch hour each Tuesday, and students would come to class with English words and phrases in mind—sometimes written down, sometimes not—for which they requested Kiksht equivalents. One by one the students would offer up a sentence or two in English, while the Grandmas listened intently.

Eventually—sometimes after an extended pause to search her memory, and hushed consultation with Mrs McInturff in Kiksht—Mrs Thompson would respond, usually once, in her impeccable Kiksht, addressing her answer as much to her counterpart Mrs McInturff as to the student. Mrs McInturff would then turn to face the student, and repeat for the student what Mrs Thompson had just said, perhaps more loudly, slowly, or several times—as many times as needed. The student interlocutor would attempt to reproduce the Kiksht utterance, with active coaching and encouragement from Mrs McInturff, while Mrs Thompson sat impassively, sometimes chuckling as the student struggled. The whole process was repeated with each student interlocutor in turn.

After several sessions I started experiencing déjà vu. The organization of turn-taking in classroom discourse recalled nothing so much as the arrangement of speaking roles that
would be in place on any important public occasion in the Warm Springs community. In their “memory ethnography” of traditional Wasco-Wishram culture Spier and Sapir identified a named procedure of Chinookan ritual speech called *k’ixʷulalix*, denoting the practice of ritual repetition of chiefly speech by a special paid functionary:

> Chiefs were provided with spokesmen . . . who repeated to the gathering in a loud voice what their principals said . . . It is well to note that this is a pattern of Wishram[-Wasco] procedure; a shaman also had his spokesman who repeated aloud what the spirit communicated to the shaman. The characteristic functionary of Northwest Coast chiefs will be recognized here (Spier and Sapir 1930:213).

This practice is very much alive today at Warm Springs. At any given time, there are a handful of elders in the community who are known to be available for hire to perform in the role known in local non-standard ‘Reservation English’ as a ‘Loudspeaker’. During the 1950s the anthropologist K.S. French documented a ceremonial activity known as “Pronouncing a name”: “Frequently,” French writes, “the person giving the name does not speak directly to the audience. Instead, a ‘spokesman’ repeats his words loudly. The name is spoken in public for the first time since the death of the previous holder” (French 1955: 93). And the phenomenon of “delegated speech”—of a kind of division of linguistic labor between a central sponsoring Principal who never (or rarely) addresses the public directly, but whose words (or, more accurately, sentiments) are animated by a functionary paid for the service—has many parallels in the ethnographic record (see, e.g., Keane 1991; see Goffman 1981 for ‘Animator’ and ‘Principal’).

This example presents a case of type-to-type interdiscursivity in Silverstein’s (2005) terms: it isn’t any particular utterance in a single meeting of the Wasco Class that gestures towards ceremonial speech; it’s the pattern of turn-taking in the classroom, and MrsMcInturff’s inhabitance of the speech-event role of ‘Loudspeaker’—recurrently over any one class meeting, and recurrently across class meetings—that does this work (see Fig. 6).

Figure 6: The Wasco Class
3. The Bentsen-Quayle debate (Omaha, Neb., October 5, 1988)

My third case will be familiar to anyone of a certain age. The setting is the Civic
Auditorium in Omaha, Nebraska on October 5, 1988, and the occasion is the Vice
Presidential debate between Senator Lloyd Bentsen (D-TX; 1921-2006) and Senator Dan
Quayle (b. 1947; R-IN).³

What’s at issue here is the use of a proper name to pick out a referent (the 35th
President of the United States). Quayle’s utterance of Jack Kennedy creates a cross-event
pathway that connects discourse during the debate event to unspecifically many (but
numerous) other speech events in other places: chains of linked speech events involving
people in the roles of Sender and Receiver, in which the expression Jack Kennedy is
involved. In this respect it is like all uses of proper names, if we follow the analysis proposed
by Asif Agha (2007: 65-67), who argues—developing the implications of the well-known
Kripke-Putnam “baptismal theory of reference”—that proper names are in fact speech chain
dectics: the linkage of a name to a referent has its origin in a “baptismal event,” but this
knowledge is then transmitted through a chain of subsequent speech events. “Indeed,” Agha
points out, “the understanding that a name correctly refers to a particular person is socially
shared only by members of a given speech chain network. ... Co-membership in a speech
chain network depends not on knowing one another but on having something common in
one’s discursive history” (Agha 2007: 67).

Since the issue in the present case is not so much one of correct reference as one of
appropriate reference, it is useful to recall Gregory Murphy’s study of personal reference in
English (Murphy 1988); Murphy points to

³https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kz9StNrkrlw
the requirement that the referring expression must project a “defensible” speaker-referent relation. This requirement ensures that speakers cannot use a name that is more intimate than they are authorized to use. The wording is consistent with Goffman’s (1967) discussion on maintaining face. In order to save face, speakers must project an image that cannot easily be destroyed. If the speaker were to use FN in referring, but then it was discovered that the speaker has never met the referent, the intimate relation that the referring expression implied would be false, and the speaker would lose face (Murphy 1988: 340).

Let’s look a little more closely at the event. Quayle has just been asked what he (as Vice President) would do upon receiving the news that the President had died or become incapacitated. Here’s an ethnopoetic rendering of Quayle’s response, leading up to the moment of interest:

3. Bentsen-Quayle debate, 5 October 1988 (Omaha, Neb)

[...]

DQ: It is nót just áge, it’s accomplishment. It’s expérience.

I háve
far móre
expérience
than many others
that sought the office of Vice President of this country.

I have as much experience in the Côngress as Jack Kénney did
when hé sought the Présidency.

I will be prépaRé
to deal with the people
in the Bush administration
if that unfortunate event
would ever occur.

Mod: Senator Bentsen?

The question, to borrow Agha’s phrasing, is about whether Quayle and Bentsen have enough in common in their respective discursive histories to warrant the former’s use of the expression Jack Kennedy. Both Quayle and Bentsen were serving in the US Senate at the time of their debate (note their reciprocal use of honorific address using Senator). But at the
time of President Kennedy’s assassination in Dallas, Kennedy was 46, Bentsen was 42, and Quayle was 16 (see Fig. 7).

Figure 7: The Bentsen-Quayle debate

This, then, is a rather complex case of token-to-type interdiscursivity (Silverstein 2005), in which Quayle’s use of a token of Jack Kennedy opens a pathway to numerous chained speech events in which this expression was used by people to refer to—and perhaps, address—the 35th President. What emerges is a type-level image of a participant in such a speech-chain (identified here as p[S-R]). At issue here is not the social characteristics (clothes, language, etc.) of such an evoked figure (as we saw in the Irish example), but the figure’s participation (or not) in such a speech-chain of usage of the referring form in question.
Following that pathway of sociality, and assessing his opponent’s plausibility as an instantiation of that figure leads Senator Bentsen to his response (in event $E_{n+1}$)—represented in Fig. 8 in a format that serves to highlight its tightly parallelistic ethnopoetic structure (complete with a chiasmus inside a chiasmus).
LB:

Senator,

I served with Jack Kennedy.

I knew Jack Kennedy.

Jack Kennedy was a friend of mine.

Senator,

you [are] no Jack Kennedy.

[loud cheers from audience ~ 15 sec]

LB: What has to be done—

   in a situation like that—

[more cheers from audience]

Mod [to audience]: Please, please—

LB: In a situation like that, is to call in the Joint—

Mod [to audience]: Once again, you're only taking time away from your own candidate.

DQ: That; was really uncalled for, Senator.

Figure 8: Bentsen’s response to Quayle
Conclusion

The three cases sketched here obviously come from culturally diverse settings: Ireland (over a 500-year period), a language revitalization classroom on an Indian reservation in the western US in the 1990s, and a televised political debate between two US candidates in 1988. The “meaningful sign forms” (Silverstein 1985: 76-77) involved are comparably diverse: a classic Labovian phonological “variable” ([s] for [s]/[z]), elevated to the status of a stereotype or shibboleth over centuries of cultural production and face-to-face interaction (the Irish example); a pattern of classroom interaction in which one “teacher” acts as a ceremonial “sponsor” or Principal while another repeats her words to the class—not a linguistic “form” as such, but a method of organizing classroom talk (the Wasco Class); and finally, the use-in-context of that most singular item in all of lexicogrammar, the personal proper name (the Quayle-Bentsen debate).

All three examples were socially consequential, at varying scales: space doesn’t permit discussion of the lasting effects in Irish society of the avalanche of cultural production, by the English and the Irish, of stereotypes of Irishness; the Wasco language class for adults was a great success, I think in part because traditional forms of valued discourse (involving delegated speech) were incorporated into a hybrid pedagogy; Dan Quayle went on to be elected Vice President of the US under George H.W. Bush, but he never recovered the credibility that was lost in a single moment during the debate with Sen. Bentsen.

Taken together, the three examples show that any meaningful sign form can function indexically both to delineate the relevant (immediate) context in which it occurs, and to establish a linkage between the immediate here-and-now and other usages of the same or similar sign forms on other occasions. In the examples discussed here, sign forms function both to contextualize their own occurrence in the immediate context of their use, and to
establish linkages between the immediate context and other contexts, often occasions of use in which they contextualize themselves in ways that are construed as similar to the situation at hand.

These examples also shed light on significant areas of overlap, and significant differences between the approach taken here and that of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). In a recent discussion of the problem of ‘context’ in SFL, Tom Bartlett defines ‘context of situation’ as being comprised of “what participants make of what is already there as a social activity” (Bartlett 2013:344); he notes that “only those features of the environment (including prior talk) that are construed as relevant to the current activity through the semantics of the text itself” really count as parts of the ‘context of situation’. One obvious problem, that Bartlett seems to recognize, is that “features of the environment” of talk only become relevant or active insofar as they are (performatively) made to be so, in and through talk: “It is the verbal activity that construes the context, while it is the features of the context that activate the semantic domains that between them comprise the register of the verbal activity” (Bartlett 2013: 344; emphasis in orig.). This necessitates the establishment of a distinction between ‘context of situation’ and what Bartlett calls the ‘environment of talk’: the environment of talk comprises “the semiotic matter that is ‘already there’” (ibid.), while the ‘context of situation’ is produced by some act of selection of such matter. Note that we are still within the confines of a single discrete speech event.

“Within any given spatio-temporal setting,” Bartlett writes, “there is a range of semiotically charged features, the meaning of which to those present is a function of their past interaction with the same or similar objects, activities and relations, but only some of which are construed as relevant context. These features form part of the speakers’ semiotic histories, elements of their socialization into cultural norms” (p. 344). Every occasion of interaction holds the potential to become more than one ‘context of situation’, partly as a
function of the backgrounds, experiences, cultural norms, etc., that participants “bring to” the situation at hand. The problem of multiple ‘contexts’ is imagined here not as chain-like relationships among contexts in actual (or imagined) social space and time—pathways—but as multiple competing “options” for how a given (individual, discrete) speech event will take shape as one ‘context’ and not any of the others that are/were possible. Hence, Bartlett asks “What are the factors that motivate the construal of one particular context, *ab initio*, from amongst those that are theoretically available within the environment?” (p. 345); in this case it is surely true that “within any environment there will be many potential but unrealized or ‘silent’ contexts” (p. 346).

Attempts to define ‘context’ within both SFL and linguistic anthropology have had to negotiate the relationship(s) between text and context. Bartlett quotes Hasan’s (2009c: 177) definition of ‘context’ as “those aspects of the situation that leave a trace in the text”; “those aspects of the situation that are illuminated by language” (Hasan 1995: 219); “those social practices that are construed through the text itself (potentially in combination with other modalities)” (Hasan 1995: 213; all quoted in Bartlett 2013: 347).

In linguistic anthropology, attention to the indexical functions of language—including those that are “grammaticalized,” as it were, in deictic expressions, tense categories, and so-called “personal pronouns” or ‘shifters’ (e.g., I, you, etc.; see Silverstein 1976)—has enabled a view of the ‘text-context’ relationship as a dialectical process, unfolding in real time in interaction (see Silverstein 1992, 1993 for definitive accounts). Especially in recent years (e.g., Agha 2007), linguistic anthropologists have been building on Sapir’s insight that “While we often speak of society as though it were a static structure defined by tradition, it is, in the more intimate sense, nothing of the kind, but a highly intricate network of partial or complete understandings between the members of organizational units of every degree of size and complexity, ranging from a pair of lovers or a family to a league of nations or that
ever increasing portion of humanity which can be reached by the press through all its
transnational ramifications” (Sapir 1949 [1931]: 104). And furthermore, that society “is only
apparently a static sum of social institutions; actually it is being reanimated or creatively
reaffirmed from day to day by particular acts of a communicative nature which obtain among
individuals participating in it” (ibid.).

options in the context of culture has never been articulated in any detail [within SFL].
Perhaps one is tacitly saying with Hjelmslev that, at this point, the sociologist and/or
anthropologist will take over” (at Bartlett 2013: 346). Bartlett suggests that “In order to
explain how specific contexts of situation come into being, we have to look beyond text to
the semiotic histories that are embedded in the wider environment, and this is the domain of
sociologists and anthropologists” (p. 346).

At this point it might be useful to return to Silverstein’s concept of ‘the total linguistic
fact’: “an unstable mutual interaction of meaningful sign forms contextualized to situations of
interested human use, mediated by the fact of cultural ideology” (Silverstein 1985: 220).
Silverstein is explicit in stating that the ‘total linguistic fact’, “the datum for a science of
language, is irreducibly dialectic in nature.”

The concept⁴ has been invoked (and quoted) repeatedly over the past three
decades, especially in synthetic articles and reviews of major trends in relevant fields,
including linguistic anthropology and UK-based linguistic ethnography (e.g., Rampton,

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⁴Thereference is to the French sociologist Marcel Mauss’s (1872-1950) argument that the phenomenon of gift
exchange constitutes “a total social fact” [fait social total]: the phenomena of exchange, Mauss argues, “are at
once legal, economic, religious, aesthetic, morphological and so on. They are legal in that they concern
individual and collective rights, organized and diffuse morality; they may be entirely obligatory, or subject
simply to praise or disapproval. They are at once political and domestic, being of interest both to classes and to
clans and families. They are religious; they concern true religion, animism, magic and diffuse religious
mentality. They are economic, for the notions of value, utility, interest, luxury, wealth, acquisition,
accumulation, consumption and liberal and sumptuous expenditure are all present...” (Mauss 1966 [1925]: 76-77).
Maybin, and Roberts 2014), to mention only two. Several commentators have parsed Silverstein’s compact formulation in helpful ways. John Haviland, for example, points to the way that

Silverstein articulates three interacting perspectives on language:
1) a structural perspective (roughly, a grammar of form);
2) a pragmatic perspective on the ‘appropriate’ and ‘effective’ uses of linguistic forms; and
3) an ideological perspective about ‘language use as a means to an end in interaction’ (1985: 222)" (Haviland 2003: 766).

In another recent commentary, Kathryn Woolard points out that

all three elements—linguistic form, social use, and human reflections on these forms in use—mutually shape and inform each other. To understand and explain any one of them we must take into account both of the other two, in Silverstein’s view. If not, we have not just a partial explanation but in fact only a partial object (Woolard 2008: 436).

Woolard rightly points out that the inclusion of ‘ideology’ here is not just a matter of supplying an inert background or cultural environment for language use; rather, ideology “is essential not just to understanding social life and the full meaning of people’s interactions with language, but to understanding the evolution of linguistic structure itself” (ibid.). Here is a point that Silverstein has been developing in recent work (Silverstein 2016).

Note that ‘structure’ or ‘form’ here refers to type-level categories of what an SFL practitioner might identify as lexicogrammar, while ‘use’ points to the way that tokens (utterances or utterance-partials) are contextualized to “situations of interested human use” as balanced somewhere between indexical presupposition (‘appropriate’ or expected use) and indexical entailment (‘creative’ or unexpected use; see Silverstein 1992, 1993, where these ideas are developed in detail). ‘Ideology’, meanwhile, encompasses any and all attempts to interpret, rationalize, or explain relationships between tokens-in-interaction and the contexts in which they occur, including interpreting them within the narrow scope of lexicogrammaras
tokens of grammatical types, or as samples of named languages (see, e.g., Jørgensen et al. 2011).

Now compare a similarly holistic and integrative concept, J.R. Firth’s concept of the “language event”:

To make statements of meaning in terms of linguistics, we may accept the language event as a whole and then deal with it at various levels, sometimes in a descending order, beginning with social context and proceeding through syntax and vocabulary to phonology and even phonetics, and at other times in the opposite order (Firth 1957c: 192; see Léon 2007).

Firth’s formulation, at first glance quite similar to Silverstein’s, is in fact fundamentally different. Firth’s concept of ‘the language event’ is a descriptive heuristic, an attempt to identify in schematic (but maximalist) fashion all the parameters of any/every language event, conceptualizing these as independent of any particular language event. It is, in the idiom of an earlier anthropological era, an “etic” framework for description, not an “emic” account (Pike 1967)—the IPA chart, in other words, as opposed to an account of the phonological system of a particular language.

For Silverstein, by contrast, ‘the total linguistic fact’ is the outcome, result, or effect of a dialectical process of social semiosis.

Firth’s ‘language event’ is an attempt to capture “what is there”—in the sense of being available to empirical observation—in any event of language use, from “macro-” to “micro-” (or the reverse). In any case, ‘culture’ is up, phonetics is down. Hasan’s diagram from her essay “Speaking with reference to context” (Hasan 2016 [1999]) presents a more elaborated view of the Firthian concept: levels of description and analysis have had to be multiplied, but the directionality is the same, and the goal seems still to be to enable the description of ‘the language event’, in all its complexity, from a single and fixed vantage point of observation (see Fig. 9).
Figure 9: From social structure to text-in-context (Hasan 2016 [1999]; Lukin 2017)
In a recent review of a book about time-travel narratives in science fiction, Fredric Jameson concludes that temporality itself "is nothing but a time-travel narrative" (Jameson 2015: 22). As Jameson observes, the central problem posed to time-travel narratives is the need for a single anchoring “point of view” from which the events can be narrated.

The analysis of social life, I'd like to suggest, faces no such problem, once we let go of the positivist epistemic stance on communication that we have inherited, severally, from Saussure and Durkheim, and from Malinowski and Firth, and adopt instead a “sign’s-eye-view” (Silverstein 2004: 631). As an analytic move, this seems in part to model how participants themselves navigate the ‘language events’ they find themselves embroiled in. One of the best ways of taking a “point of view” on an interaction while it is happening in the here-and-now is to inhabit (or, re-inhabit) a participant stance that is understood by reference or renvoi to participation in various thers-and-thens of interaction, whether these are actual, imagined, or merely possible. All three of my examples are examples of this.

Jameson addresses the problem of the observer in time-travel narratives, “the source of the ‘point of view’,,” and finds that “the privileged position of the observer can only be such in virtue of occupying one more alternate universe, which someone has to be observing in turn (if God is not available)” (ibid.). Jameson finds that, for time-travel narratives at least, “the ultimate observer's place must be in a space beyond space” (ibid).

Linguistic anthropology has faced similar dilemmas. As Franz Boas and later in his own way Benjamin Whorf discovered to their epistemological chagrin, it's impossible to find a neutral or external point of view from which to describe the grammar of any given language, as long as you are using the grammar of another language for your description. For Boas the trigger was his discovery, articulated in his Introduction to the Handbook of American Indian Languages, that “every language may be holophrastic from the point of view of another language” (Boas 1911: 26; by “holophrasis” Boas meant “the tendency of a
language to express a complex idea by a single term”). Having arrived at this profound insight, Boas withdrew into particularism. For Whorf it was the impossible project of ‘calibrating’ the world’s languages that led to his eventual retreat into the mystical metalanguage of Theosophy, which was really a return to his intellectual roots in uber-WASP New England transcendentalism (Rollins 1971).

But maybe Boas and Whorf were looking in the wrong place: in langue instead of parole—in ‘structure’ alone, rather than in the dialectical interplay of structure, use, and ideology. Because it is in fact possible to “calibrate” the relationship between one verbal encounter—one speech event, playing itself out in real time—and unlimitedly many others. Time travel is not only possible, it's what ordinary people do every day.
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