

LANGUAGE AND TIME¹

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0. *Prelude*

The first thing that strikes one when he studies the facts of language is that, for the talking subject, their succession in time is nonexistent: he faces a state. And so the linguist who wants to understand that state must make *tabula rasa* of everything that has produced the state and ignore diachrony. He cannot enter the consciousness of talking subjects except by suppressing the past. The intervention of history can only corrupt his judgment. (de Saussure 1975: 117; my translation)

Once you have begun by separating diachronic from synchronic... you can never really put them back together again. If the opposition in the long run proves to be a false or misleading one, then the only way to suppress it is by throwing the entire discussion on a higher dialectical plane. (Jameson 1972: 18)²

When I am invited to an exchange where linguists talk about language and time I come to such a meeting with a certain baggage; I have an idea — most likely incomplete but hopefully not wrong — of what organizers and participants have in mind. Some of the issues are reflected in contributions to this conference: conceptions of time based on linguistic representations of encoding of time in morphology, syntax, semantics, and the construction of texts; and the uses of linguistic data and methods in reconstructing historical sequences of socio-cultural developments. If topics such as linguistic evidence for population movement, genetic relationship among languages, and language change³ do not show up on this occasion this reflects the scope of actual submissions, not that of possible applications of linguistics to questions of time or history. A larger

¹ Prepared for presentation/discussion at a symposium on “Language and Time” at the University of Antwerp, April 4, 2003.

² I used both quotations in an essay published almost twenty-five years ago (Fabian 1979). A mistake I made in the translation of de Saussure is now corrected.

³ The latter was discussed by one of the conveners of this conference more than a decade ago, see Meeuwis & Brisard (1993), also for a review of relevant literature.

gathering could address a more comprehensive catalogue but in that case the borders of the field may recede into invisibility. Who would be prepared to offer an exact and generally accepted limitation of “linguistics” (let alone “language”)? Who has a clear understanding of the ease with which we move from TIME to HISTORY and back; and who does not feel today that the distinction, once much employed, between synchronic and diachronic relations and approaches has been (part of) the problem, certainly not the solution, when it comes to understanding “language and time”?

What I can contribute to this vast topic comes from work as a practitioner of language-centered anthropology. I cannot speak with the authority of a linguist. But neither do I speak as an anthropologist who defers to the authority of linguistics when it comes to the study of language as a medium of culture and a medium of producing knowledge about culture. “Language-centered” is an awkward and imprecise phrase but I know of nothing better to label a theoretical and methodological orientation that I need to invoke when I reflect on why a focus on language seems to result in getting preoccupied with time.

In retrospect, I find that it has been a growing awareness of our ways with time (in language, communication, performance, and narration) that has kept me interested in a field of study where pragmatically oriented approaches in linguistics and language-oriented views of anthropology converge.

In summarizing what comes to my mind when I think of language and time, I will recall, first, how preoccupation with language led anthropologists to paying attention to time; second, I will consider how awareness of time acquired by language-centered anthropology may influence our view of the nature of language.

1. From language to time

My story begins at a juncture in the history of linguistics⁴ where taxonomic, structural, and semiotic approaches were criticized, at about the same time, as insufficiently formal and as being too formalist. According to a greatly simplified scenario of that period, Noam Chomsky and Dell Hymes led movements of generative grammarians and sociolinguists (or ethnographers of speaking), respectively, movements that were consciously and sometimes explicitly opposed to each other. The Chomskyites went on to conquer the market in departments of linguistics; the sociolinguists and ethnographers, after

⁴ Linguistics in the US, to be precise, because this is where I was socialized in a four-fields program that included an introduction to linguistics, mainly to principles of descriptive phonology and lexical-semantic techniques such as componential analysis and ethnoscience.

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flirting with rules and grammars of communication, went back to being sociologists, anthropologists, and descriptive linguists. Dell Hymes himself had once said that sociolinguistics should be self-liquidating if and when it succeeded in its mission⁵.

To anthropologists/ethnographers who, often for different reasons, had put language in the center of their thought and research, ethnography of speaking provided a theoretical frame, a set of technical terms, and an agenda for research that made it possible to address questions that were too sociological (or literary) for linguists and too linguistic for cultural and social anthropologists. Arguably, this movement also prepared our discipline for the reception of critical theory and for the postcolonial “Reinvention of anthropology” propagated by Dell Hymes⁶. Most importantly, a focus on language in ethnography caused us, in our search for alternatives to naive scientism (“positivism” was the epithet at the time), to consider the epistemological significance and the practical consequences of our ways with time in field research and writing.

Critique of linguistic formalism also provided arguments for a critique of formalist models (some of them derived from linguistics) that conceived of society and culture as systems (of action or of signs/symbols); it helped us, if not to debunk then at least to relativize the scientific value of structuralist and functionalist-structuralist anthropology. Both had favored SYNCHRONIC analyses of states and systems predicated on the elimination of time. The ground was prepared for rethinking society/culture as process and praxis (or as discourse, or as poesis). That formalist views of culture, at least in their extreme forms, have now been abandoned by most was, in my understanding, the most widely shared effect of a chain of turns in anthropology that started with the critique of linguistic formalism.

Once faith in an all-encompassing positivist conception of science was lost, alternatives offered themselves in interpretive approaches — hermeneutics — that promoted a view of culture as “ensembles of texts” (Geertz, building on

⁵ Perhaps this courage to see one’s efforts as self-effacing comes from Hymes’s appreciation of the poetic nature of language and, I suspect, of the study of language. This is something he shares with Paul Friedrich, who, in his famous essay on “Linguistic relativity and the order-to-chaos continuum”, examines “paradoxes of temporality” and quotes from Robert Frost’s *The Figure a Poem Makes* this striking image: “Like a piece of ice on a hot stove, a poem must ride on its own melting” (Friedrich 1986: 133). See also Paul Friedrich’s recent survey of the state of “ethnopoetics” (in press).

⁶ The two classical texts are a collection of Hymes’s writings (Hymes 1974) and one of essays by critical anthropologists he edited (Hymes 1974 [1969]).

Ricoeur). In a related development, dramatist conceptions of society and culture became prominent (Kenneth Burke in literary theory, perhaps Goffman in sociology, but above all Victor Turner in anthropology). Dramatist figures and metaphors (think of ACTORS and ROLES) had been employed in sociology before they took the center of theorizing in a more literal sense, especially when PERFORMANCE became a key concept in anthropology (and folklore studies)⁷.

To make these general observations more concrete, allow me now to recall what brought me from “language to time”. The move came by a detour through two problems I faced as an ethnographer. The first one was to find an alternative to positivist notions of scientific objectivity, notions that I had found incapable of guiding research on a religious movement I was engaged in at the time. The alternative I eventually proposed, emerged when I realized that it was *language* (as speaking and text) that kept the movement I studied together *and* allowed me to inquire into a social phenomenon that eluded conventional methods and techniques. Both, the movement’s cohesion and ethnographic access to it, hinged on intersubjectivity presupposed and enacted by language, now understood as communication. As a praxis, communication occurs in events (Dell Hymes’s “speech events”) in which participants share time and act as coevals. Inasmuch as ethnography is communicative (because language-based), it, too, demands sharing of time. Hence we need to worry about time spent together, time as co-presence. Such time is not given (in the way natural, physical time is as a measure of duration) but must be created and maintained in order for production of knowledge to take place.

If that is so, then the second problem I mentioned arises in the form of a glaring contradiction between our ways with time during empirical research and a pervasive feature of the discourse about our findings, which has been to deny COEVALNESS to our object of study — something we have been doing by consistently placing that object, let’s call it the Other, in a time other than that of the researcher. We do this by discursive, hence also linguistic, means. Because of their obvious ideological and political implications for constructing alterity, our practices of re-presenting knowledge gained through co-presence need to be criticized and changed (Fabian 2002).

What happens (and what ought to happen) between presence in the field and re-presentation (mainly) in writing has been a subject of debate in anthropology for about two decades, and certain results and consequences that are relevant to our topic can now be noted.

⁷ Key texts documenting the interpretive turn were assembled in a reader edited by Rabinow & Sullivan (1979). On Turner, see his posthumous book (1986).

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As far as language- and text-centered ethnography is concerned, time and timing became more important as we realized that moving from a primarily INFORMATIVE to a COMMUNICATIVE view of ethnography (i.e. from one that thought of itself as data gathering to one that acknowledged the (co)productive nature of research) inevitably leads us to consider a third move, which consists of recognizing the PERFORMATIVE aspects of ethnography. Much of what we can know or learn about a culture/society does not come in the form of answers to our questions, but as performances in which the ethnographer acts, as V. Turner once put it, as an “ethnodramaturg” or as a kind of producer or provider of occasions where significant communicative events happen⁸. When I speak of moves, I have in mind a learning process that took place in the course of reinventing ethnography. If I give the impression that each move superseded the previous position, then only in the sense that concentrating on one of them at a given time reflects the labors of critique and the need to argue forcefully for new insights and for strategies of applying them in our practices of research. I am *not* suggesting that ethnographers can disregard information gathering and language communication once they have discovered performance.

A similar point needs to be made, even though I can I do this here only as an aside, regarding parallel moves away from REFERENCE to CONNOTATION in assessing the role of language as a model for culture (and of linguistics for anthropology). Connected to this was the attention that anthropologists began to pay to the role of metaphor within cultures and to rhetoric and poetics in ethnographic representations of culture⁹.

Closely related as these developments may have been, certainly in their focus on language, they differed greatly in that we find little concern with time in the second one, exceptions notwithstanding, as a quotation from Friedrich will show below. What accounts for that difference and what is its significance for our topic? My hunch is that the critique of “referentiality” remained a largely intra-linguistic (or literary) concern, limited to the study of means and forms by which language signifies time. Such inquiry can of course include the specific ways in which languages accomplish these tasks. It is hard to imagine a study of cultural conceptions of time (of the “time among the xyz” type) that does not draw at least on language evidence and often on linguistic analysis. But this kind

⁸ This is how I put it in *Power and Performance* (1990: 3–7) and applied it also in a later study of popular painting and historiography (1996: ch. 3).

⁹ A partial list of references would include Fernandez (1986), Friedrich (1986), Sapir & Crocker (1977), and Silverstein (1976).

of interest in “language and time” and the focus on time resulting from language-centered ethnography have little in common — one can do “anthropology of time” without worrying to what extent anthropology can only be done in and through time.

2. *From time to language*

The differences and divergences noted so far do not bode well for a synthesis of disciplinary questions and findings regarding language and time. Is there anything at all that could help us to find our way out of the fog of polysemy that tends to descend on such discussions? I want to offer an idea, fully realizing that it is quite tentative. It is also limited in that it has a chance of being considered only by those to whom relating language and time is an empirical, hence a practical, and hence an epistemological, problem. “Epistemological” means related to accounting for and justifying practices of knowledge production. It seems to me that we can take a first step by reversing the order of reflection. What happens when we try to understand our empirical predicament by asking ourselves (anthropologists and linguists) how we get from time to language?

My point of departure involves taking a philosophical position that is materialist and dialectical. When I reviewed what brought me from language-centered anthropology to concerns with time, I said that it was the insight that time, in the sense of presence and co-presence, is a condition of ethnographic knowledge production. Presence, I also noted, is not a given, which means that the kind of time I have in mind is not given but made. Such making of time — we might call it timing — occurs in what most of our private as well as professional life amounts to: making it through the day. This is one, though not the only, sense in which I think of my position as materialist: scientific, scholarly study does not take place in timeless spheres of reason; it belongs to making it through the day and that, by the way, is a predicament we most obviously share with those whom we study.

Among the things we do in order to make it through the day are working and talking. The two are connected in the minds of language philosophers (who define and contemplate language as work) and of certain social scientists (who study the interplay between work and communication, for instance). Only rarely do we stop to consider the capacity shared by work and language to produce timing, a capacity they exercise rhythmically, one is tempted to say: percussively, by means of a material medium, sound, and a bodily activity, speaking¹⁰.

¹⁰ I cannot resist citing two essays, one by Bücher on work and rhythm (1897, with several later editions), the other by Jousse on oral delivery and rhythm (1925). Recognized as classics in a

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Not only *what* language expresses/signifies, or *how* it accomplishes this, but *that* it does this, actually, not just generally, keeps us most strongly concerned with language and time.

If presence is a fundamental condition of knowledge production, what does this mean for representations of knowledge, anthropological and linguistic? Of course, such a question is meaningful only to those anthropologists and linguists who think of their disciplines as empirical sciences. Empirical, to state what may look obvious but nevertheless needs spelling out, means that whatever is presented as knowledge is based on evidence, material, data that are gathered (or produced, when one considers how communicative ethnography works) in the course of research. If we limit the problems that this involves to those that regard language-centered research and ask in what form language data become available through documentation, the answer is: texts. In my view, if this is accepted it opens yet another perspective on language and time. Epistemologically this means that what we have said earlier about presence must include memory in the sense that texts become evidence through being re-recognized as relevant. There are no texts *as such*, every text exists in a context of other texts and our ability to recognize such context presupposes remembrance of a past. Put more concretely: current practices of speaking or “*linguaging*” are always re-hearsals of earlier practices. In that sense, acknowledging that working with texts requires recourse to a corpus of texts is but another way of acknowledging the temporal nature of language evidence. It would also follow that anthropologists and linguists who accept this view of empirical inquiry into language practice their disciplines as historical sciences, whether or not they relate their findings to history or historiography.

Let me now quote some supporting statements. First, here is how Friedrich brilliantly expresses a view I share:

There exists an interesting position that I would like to mention though I cannot affirm. At one level, the only reality for language is the here and now; that language makes present whatever it entertains; that the past of language has survived into its present and the future of language is an anticipatory implication. In these terms, intentionally couched in an extreme form, language contains its past and future as its present or contains its time and processes within itself. This increases the complexity of the present and hence the individuality and nontranslatability of language. (1986: 133)

When I questioned Friedrich whose position he had in mind when he evoked it to state his own (although he seems to keep a certain distance) he responded that

number of fields, they seem to have been largely ignored by linguists and anthropologists, at least at the time when I received my training.

he probably thought of the poet Wallace Stevens, on whom he had been working at the time. At any rate, he said, “my involvement in historical linguistics and existentialism are in there somehow” (personal communication).

Next I should like to quote from writings of anthropologist-linguist A. L. Becker. I already used his term “*linguaging*” (credited to John Dewey and Humberto Maturana). Language is a “system of rules or structures... essentially a dictionary and grammar”, whereas “[*l*]inguaging can be understood as taking old texts from memory and reshaping them into present contexts... Most current theories of language have no place for memory” (Becker 1995: 9). In another essay he states his distinction as follows:

There are two basic ways to think about grammar... One view leads us to think of the field of study as a system of rules that somehow maps abstract and a priori semantic categories and relations onto phonic substance...

There is another kind of grammar, based on a different perspective on language, one involving *time and memory*; or, in terms of contextual relations, a set of prior texts that one accumulates throughout one’s lifetime...

From the first point of view, constraints common to all languages tend to be structural (or logical); from the second, pragmatic (or rhetorical). What I call philology might also be called a rhetorically based linguistics. (1995: 188–189; my emphasis)

So far, Becker seems to propose his distinction as a way of assigning linguistics and what he calls “*philology*” different, perhaps complementary, tasks in the study of language. But I also hear a challenge to formalism in statements such as the following: “We are not so much compositors of sentences from bits as reshapers of prior texts... Language interaction is not a closed system (i.e., rule governed)” (1995: 189)¹¹.

3. Conclusion: An old grudge and an open question

The critique of linguistic formalism — of the kind of linguistics that requires the elimination of time — was at the beginning of developments in language-centered anthropology that led to a veritable “*irruption*” of time (an expression borrowed from M. Foucault) into our thinking about empirical research, communication, performance, change, and, indeed, the construction of our object.

¹¹ That was also the conclusion I came to in an essay on “Rule and process” in which I reject the notion that ethnography could be rule governed, except in certain limited ways. At the center of the argument is a model intended to show how a communicative exchange is transformed through time that not only elapses but becomes shared (Fabian 1979, reprinted in 1991: ch. 5; see especially pp. 96–103).

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I am now left with a quandary for which I have no ready solution. The task/aim of a critique of formalist “grammarians” cannot be to disprove their claims with the help of arguments that are built on notions such as CONTEXT, PERFORMANCE, HISTORICITY, and so forth. Logic is not invalidated by history, semiotics not by pragmatics, mathesis not by poetics (or the other way around). But ancient connections between logic and rhetoric keep us aware of tensions between the two and make us weary of attempts to establish a peaceful coexistence between imaginable worlds of pure “ratiocination” and experienced worlds of reasoning. Of course, such tensions can arise and exist only if there is a common ground between formal and material reasoning. To be able to map such a common ground is, in my view, a condition for a project of giving *synthetic* accounts of work that somehow bears on the question of language and time.

A way to put all this more concretely is to keep asking a simple question: What is the common rationale, the synthesis of reasoning, in, for instance, Chomsky’s linguistic formalism and his politics¹²? I am not qualified — and simply don’t have the time — to seek an answer from a detailed critical analysis of his writings. I simply want to report what at one time convinced me that Chomsky was not prepared even to discuss connections. In a brief exchange of letters in the late seventies (when I was working on *Time and the Other*), I challenged him to tell me how, in his linguistic work, he could keep ignoring language in social action, the object of sociolinguistics. His answer was that he simply did not understand what sociolinguistics was about. I pointed out to him that any first-year student can understand what sociolinguistics is about and that his reply was not an answer but a put-down, a closure, a refusal, as I would say now, to link — or SYNTHESIZE — logic and rhetoric, science and politics. Being shut up, I confess, angered me. On the other hand, the grudge I have been bearing ever since may have helped me to pursue language-centered anthropology without getting intimidated by linguistics.

Where does this leave us regarding a possible synthesis of work on language and time? For linguists, language is the system of rules and structures that constructs or generates (the words, sentences, texts that make up) speaking. Because such a system must be thought as fundamentally timeless, language

¹² Why, in fact, should we even ask such a question? In my case it was a gap I perceived (and perceive) between political positions I shared and an intellectual vision of science and language that flaunts its purity and detachment from reality. Such a gap can only be bridged, or rather filled, with personal faith or equally personal morals, neither of which encourages political dialogue based on argument and reasoning.

must somehow be thought as being able to do without speaking (which cannot but occur in time).

Can the study of speaking do without the linguist's language? It would seem to me that an affirmative answer can be argued for, in that actual talk (from phonation to rhetoric) would not be work (or play, for that matter) — a human, material practice — except by virtue of a difference between, a nonidentity of, rule and speech, system and action. And yet, it would be silly to deny the need to distinguish language from speaking. Language is not the place where speaking, consisting of events that are ending as soon as they begin, *lives*. But it is nevertheless the place where it *survives*. Here is the paradox of continuity through time being enacted discontinuously. Actually, “enacted” weakens, takes the sting out of, the paradox. Speaking *is* language, all the language there is — at that moment.

This argument is analogous to one that pleads for a dialectical conception of culture and cultural identity. Culture is not what we live; as a positive concept it is incapable of representing how societies or groups actually create, maintain, and change identities in real space and time. Only if we can think of it as always including its negation can culture continue to serve as an idea capable of guiding anthropology as a science, not of human life, but of human survival¹³.

So the open question is: Will this discussion, once we have recognized that distinguishing between temporal and a-temporal views of language may be a practical option but cannot be maintained theoretically, reach the “higher dialectical plane” (evoked by Fredric Jameson in the second epigram above) and move on toward a new synthesis?

Appendix: Scraps

This essay had to fit the time economy of an oral presentation. The fragmentary thoughts that follow may or may not be worth working into an extended version.

Language (like work...) is a word with many meanings. It inhabits a vast and messy semantic space that does not hold still for contemplation if only because it needs to be spoken to show its shape and contours, something that can be done only in time. Language's time is created through speaking. Linguistics that eliminates time eliminates its object. Its own name is unearned, a deception.

¹³ See the essay on “Culture with an attitude” in Fabian (2001: ch. 5).

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Question: Who deceives whom?

Linguistics that eliminates time is metaphysics in theory and a kind of mysticism in practice, at best; it is an imperial, hegemonic pursuit, at worst. Hence its disdain for what de Saussure called (and acknowledged as) *la masse parlante* (de Saussure 1975: 12–13).

Speaking is essentially temporal (time being neither just one of its VARIABLES nor a constant, such as physical duration) because it is a material (bodily) and a social (individual) activity.

One of the most pervasive metaphorical designations of language is to call it a tool. In this form it has probably had its most “successful” and enduring career in anthropology, both as a key model for thinking culture and as a key method for studying culture. But calling language a tool is just another way of taking it out of action and time — by definition, a tool, while it is used, cannot change; nor can a tool change its user, at least not in the short run.

Attention to speaking subverts attempts to keep form and content, structure and meaning separate. This is a lesson I once learned from an ethnographic discovery whose consequences I still try to understand: the plural and hence individuating expression *mu biswahili bwao/mu kiswahili yake*, (un)translatable as ‘in their Kiswahilis, in his/her Kiswahili’. What I see behind this “idiom” is the awareness that a language in its entirety (for this is what its being named Kiswahili seems to mean) does not exist except in actual realizations — speaking. Hence the need to acknowledge that Swahili, the form, the tool, the medium cannot be divorced from what is being said, the content, the material, the message.

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