

Agency

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Agency underlies many research interests across the social sciences: How do social organizations continue to reproduce themselves across time and space? How do individuals and communities negotiate their standings in relation to these organizations and in relation to one another? Where does change come from and how can we, as academics, develop research projects that bring beneficial change to the situations and communities we write about? We hope to highlight new directions that scholars in linguistic anthropology have set out with respect to this broad concept of *agency*, with a particular eye toward the enriching critiques posed by attention to nonhuman agency and toward embodiment as the necessary, ultimate site of agency.

Drawing from previous reviews of the concept in linguistic anthropology, including Ahearn (2001, 2017) and Duranti (1994, 2004), our proposed definition of agency is *the capacity for socially meaningful action*. This harkens in particular to Ahearn's (2001) definition of agency as "the socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (112). Ahearn's work engages with the long-standing question across the social sciences and especially within feminist theory regarding the role of preexisting structure, which constrains the possibilities for human action, as compared to individual agency (also discussed in terms of *practice*; e.g. Ortner 1989), which generates change and new meaning. We suggest that our definition's additional attention to meaning may help focus analysis on the particularities of the social semiotic mechanisms that mediate action. Under our definition, the creation and interpretation of meaning is what allows for the construction of socially relevant actors and their actions – and ultimately, agency. Meaning here is fundamentally intersubjective, dictated by what a particular group or community recognizes as possible actions and actors. Agency in this view draws heavily from the work done regarding *identity* in sociocultural linguistics, in that identity, theorized as an interactional accomplishment, relies on one's capacity for social action (Bucholtz and Hall 2005). In other words, there exist locally situated heuristics for the recognition and interpretation of action that directly relate to the range of possible agency and the identities any entity may be recognized to have within a particular community or situated interaction.

Peircean semiotics provides a framework for the relationship between meaning and action through the notion of *the interpretant*. The interpretant is the force of the semiotic process – the turn of the head in response to a pointed finger or, less obviously, the change in attention or cognitive state effected by some sign or another. Kockelman (2017) further argues that, in order to be understood as an interpretant, this reaction must itself be able to stand as a sign; in other words, an interpretant must "mean" something as well, pulling one down a chain of signs and their effects. Each step along this chain relies on the same sociocultural factors that govern semiotic processes more

generally. Individuals use culturally and contextually specific ideological lenses to make meaning out of the world around them.

Indexicality is the primary semiotic mechanism through which we can see agency function. Indexical links are based in existential connections, rather than arbitrary cultural convention (*symbol*) or similarity of qualities (*icon*). Peirce identified causality as a potential source of these existential links; an early example of his was the weathercock, whose position is dictated by the direction of the wind and which therefore indexes this causal force (Peirce 1931–1958, CP 2.286). As put by Keane (2003), indexicality “can open up signification to causality” (417) – to the actions and reactions of agents. Rather than relying on pure convention for signification, people live in a world full of actions and possible actors, and indexicality as a theoretical tool acknowledges this. Importantly, this “opening up” does not only reflect back on already established connections. Indexicality also describes the ways in which contexts are constructed and made recognizable through language, as indicated by Silverstein’s (2003) *creative or entailing indexicality*. The utterance of the pronoun *we* is the action that rhetorically creates a group that includes the speaker – a group that the pronoun then reflexively points to (as opposed to a *they*, for instance). That is, agency and social meaning are co-constitutive through the mechanism of indexicality: Indexicality points toward the actions of agents, while at the same time imbuing those actions with meaning and thereby agency. A speaker of the word *we* is pointing toward some constellation of actions that bind a certain set of actors together as a “we,” thereby giving those actions meaning and the actors agency.

In much the same way that footprints index the existence of some kind of foot-owning ambulatory creature, actions index their agents. The shape and size of footprints lead to a particular understanding of what sort of animal made these tracks; likewise, we interpret salient details of actions as indexical of certain sorts of agents. Put differently, indexicality links actions, which might include the use of one linguistic form over another, to socially recognizable *identities* (Bucholtz and Hall 2004). It is for this reason that indexicality has become a key concept for interrogating human agency, especially with respect to historically marginalized groups whose actions may be imagined and interpreted as inferior or illegitimate by hegemonic “listening subjects” (e.g. Chun and Lo 2016; Inoue 2003; Reyes 2014; Rosa 2018).

Agency, like indexicality, relies on ideologies that transform salient actions into meaningful signs. Keane (2003) names these *semiotic ideologies*: “basic assumptions about what signs are and how they function in the world” (419). Due to differing semiotic ideologies, the same action may be taken as indexing the presence of spirits, natural forces, or human interference – or it may not be construed as any sort of sign at all – each leading to a very different ecosystem of agency. For example, the agents responsible for a severe weather event such as a mega-tornado may be variously construed as the weather system, global warming, the polluters who cause global warming, the corporations who facilitate it, or even God’s vengeance on transgender people. As such, it is not only the actions of humans that give rise to interpretants or can be said to “meaningfully act.” A truly non-universalizing, ethnographically rooted theory of agency must be agnostic toward what is or can be “truly agentic”: Agency in all its complexity refers both to the range of socioculturally mediated *acts* and also, interwoven, the possible *actors*. Who, and what, can act meaningfully? Indexicality

does not only “open up” meaning to causality, but also to fundamental questions of ontology and epistemology. What does a particular community of speakers believe can cause other things, and how far down a chain of causes and effects are we willing to travel in our search for agents?

Recognition of nonhuman – potentially even non-living – agents may be assisted through Silvio’s (2010) proposal of *animation*, used to examine instances of self- and identity-construction when *performance* does not seem to capture the full picture. Rather than focusing on performativity’s ties to “the expression of self-identity” (Silvio 2010, 423), animation asks questions regarding diffuse identity and agency – for example, a cartoon character written by one person, drawn by another, and voiced by yet another. That we can then watch this cartoon in action and imagine it as “one agent” comes from a “misrecognition” of the labor involved. What animation provides is a way to think about the individuality and dividuality of agents. Gershon (2011) describes neoliberal agency as importantly encouraging a “misrecognition of scale,” wherein corporations are viewed as individuals and individual humans are “simply smaller versions of corporations” (541). Like an animated character interpreted as a single actor, actions done by or on behalf of a corporation may be interpreted as coming from a single rational agentic force. A complex chain of resource extraction and manufacturing may be consolidated into a single brand, masking the labor involved in what appears to be a simple, single economic transaction between seller and consumer (see also Manning and Gershon 2013). We might ask, then, how actions done by individual people within a local context nevertheless come to index an international corporate entity.

An attention to meaning further highlights how struggles for agency so often interweave with struggles for the “right” to interpret others’ actions or to have one’s own interpretation adopted by others. Knowledge, after all, is always a political issue, laden with power (Foucault 1975, 1978). If we then take *knowledge*, as Kockelman (2007) does, to refer to the ability to reason with signs and their meanings, we see how power can define the links between certain signs and meanings and privilege certain communities’ semiotic ideologies over others on the basis of race, gender, sexuality, social class, ability, and other societal inequalities. It is power, for example, that constructs the traditional semiotic links between genders and certain types of bodies – making it so that a body with a vagina “means” woman. The crux of much transgender activism, then, is the right for trans individuals to be read (that is, *interpreted*) as their self-identified gender. This may be done linguistically, as when transgender men reject the possibility of interpreting their bodies as female by instead opting for typically male terminology that, for example, reinterprets their clitorises as penis-like (Edelman and Zimman 2014).

As subjects are embedded in multiple networks simultaneously, their actions may have varying meanings within these social systems. These differing *indexical orders* (Silverstein 2003) construct a range of possible linkages between forms and meanings, as the agents constructed in one indexical order are presupposed yet also created anew in another when new contexts and new forms of meaningful action become possible. Ethnographic studies of youth language, particularly in educational environments, offer complex examples of how indexical orders emerge relationally for purposes of identity work (e.g. Bucholtz 2011; Eckert 2000; Mendoza-Denton 2000; Reyes 2007; Nakassis 2016; Rosa 2018; Shankar 2008). At the same time, language forms taken by a speaker

as indexical of certain stances or identities, such as described by Ochs (1992), may later come to have very different indexical links according to a different listening subject. According to Inoue (2004), the concept of Japanese women's language came into being only when male Japanese elites named it and simultaneously positioned it as inferior; however, this *indexical inversion* – named due to the “inversion” of the expected timeline of denotational fact leading to ideological interpretations – also creates a social reality within which Japanese women can presently tap into the meanings of “women's language.” These different indexical orders cannot be viewed as only a matter of different perspectives, but are hierarchically ordered as well. Preexisting societal structures create “orders of indexicality” wherein certain linkages are privileged over others (Blommaert 2007).

Therefore, while people reason about their and others' behaviors – that is, while they construct theories of agency and action – they reckon with a range of possible explanations. For example, Strauss (2007), looking at the discourses around gun control following the Columbine shootings, demonstrates how Americans are not essentially bound to an individualistic ideology wherein people are free agents in full control of their actions, but rather also deploy alternative explanations for particular political and social ends – such as in order to advocate for gun control, placing the blame of spree killings not on the shooters but on gun advocates. Speakers may even deploy different models of agency to different populations within the same discourse context, particularly with regards to “in-group” and “out-group” agents. LaDousa (2007) presents the case of college students who defend the use of sexually suggestive house names by asserting that out-group members, who might take offense to the names, would be unable to correctly interpret such meanings. Analyzing these multiple systems of meaning requires close ethnographic work that attends to contextually situated deployments of agency. Rather than generalizing about what agency looks like in a particular community, linguistic anthropology examines the sorts of models that exist as resources by which people within a certain community can interpret events, and in what contexts they might prefer one model over another.

The body is the first and last site of agency. It is, ultimately, what acts and is acted upon. Bodies are furthermore intrinsic to language: Language must be spoken, written, signed, or otherwise located within a body. Attempts to view language as a disembodied enterprise – the realm of logical relations and context-free meaning – has been rightfully criticized from diverse perspectives as misguided (Bucholtz and Hall 2016; Farnell 2012; Goodwin 2000; Streeck 2015). The importance of the body to the communication of ideology has been a growing site of research, ranging from work on gesture (Hall, Goldstein, and Ingram 2016; Hoenes del Pinal 2011; Lempert 2011) to self-stylings of the body (Babel 2018; Calder 2019; Eckert 2000; Harkness 2013; Mendoza-Denton 2000; Nakassis 2016). In each of the cases, the capacity to act meaningfully occurs not only through strictly linguistic channels, but also throughout all kinds of semiotic processes, including those that are embodied and, as another extension of this research, those that may be embodied through *nonhuman* forms.

Scholars have worked productively with the idea of nonhuman agency from a number of directions. Everyday objects are used in order to structure human agency and sociality, seen in such varying ways as how people organize identities and social

action around alcoholic beverages (Manning 2012; Silverstein 2006) or how people negotiate the altered perceptual abilities afforded by scientific instruments (Goodwin 1997; Latour and Woolgar 1979). However, nonhuman entities are also discursively positioned as agents in their own right, their actions imbued with meaning within the social world ostensibly otherwise inhabited by humans. As the actions of animals are interpreted, their agentic capabilities are made recognizable, presupposed into existence much like forms of human agency, even if this agency may not be rendered as quite equal to human-centered agency. Smith (2012), describing animal-directed speech by Aymaran ranchers, explains this as a situation where “the animals are not held to be fully knowledgeable or responsible agents in a given context, [but] they are nonetheless made to act within it” (314). Expanding this still further, we can say that inanimate materials function with similar kinds of agency, as their effects on other materials and on humans are made salient in a semiotic world (Kockelman and Enfield 2017).

Such discussions are important to linguistic anthropologists precisely for their critique of the assumed primacy of language in sociality. Language should be “provincialized,” to use Thurlow’s (2016) term, “to recognize its limits, to acknowledge its constructedness, and to open ourselves up to a world of communicating beyond – or beside/s – words” (Thurlow 2016, 503; see also Bucholtz and Hall 2016; Pennycook 2018). To limit discussion of sociality, and therefore agency, only to that which is linguistic or clearly language-adjacent omits a range of possible meaning-making and agentic strategies.

Furthermore, what we mean by something as seemingly straightforward as “the human body” must be as flexible and open to contextual specificity as “agent.” Scholars of disability have done significant work critiquing normative understandings of the human body and its expected abilities (Davis 2005; Mitchell and Snyder 1997). How, for example, does engagement with embodiment intersect with prosthetics or other assistive technologies, which may or may not be felt as “part of the body” or as having agency of their own (Al Zidjaly 2015; Jones 2011; Keating 2017; Keating and Mirus 2003)? Can theories of the embodied voice and its agency extend to the text-to-speech technologies that many rely on for everyday conversation (Reno 2012)?

Anthropologists of autism have demonstrated how attention to atypical embodiment engenders new understandings of agency and its possibilities (Ochs and Solomon 2004, 2010; Solomon 2010). Autism spectrum disorder has ideological ties to the image of disembodied intellect: It is characterized foremost as a condition of non-normative cognition and sociality, despite reports by self-advocates suggesting the possible importance of differences in sensory integration and motor action (Donnellan, Hill, and Leary 2013). It is only recently that an understanding of “autistic embodiment” has been possible, with attention given to the non-normative ways in which autistic individuals experience themselves and the world. Of course, brains are embodied and material as well. Even this notion, in particular seen in the commonplace characterization of autism as “a different brain structure,” alters understandings of autistic agency. Fein (2011) found that, in the context of the schools she studied, material seemed to preclude moral culpability. The behaviors of autistic children were rendered as the result of blameless biology, not personal choice – not the actions of social agents, situated within a network of relationships, but rather the outcome of deterministic physical laws.

Here is where the attribution of agency meets a key purpose: Creating agents means placing blame. Agents can be protagonists or antagonists; they can act either in ways that the interpreter believes were right and correct or in ways the interpreter condemns. The privileging of particular forms of knowledge and interpretation then directly leads to the institutionalization of certain castings of accountability. This has direct material ramifications for those held culpable – or left blameless.

As academics, we must remain conscious of how our interpretations of others' agency are themselves structurally privileged as agentic actions – as meaningful statements about the world. While we reason with signs and their meanings, we form understandings of agency that have consequences for both the populations we work with and for society more broadly. The institutional frameworks within which we work grant our interpretations expertise and power, making us potential agents for both negative and positive change.

SEE ALSO: Body, Embodiment; Classes of Signs; Critical Theory and Linguistics; Language and Gender; Language and Identity; Language and Power; Methods in Linguistic Anthropology: Experiments; Peirce, Charles Sanders; Style and Stylization; Youth Language

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