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Book Review

Language, Culture, and Society - An Introduction to Linguistic Anthropology Zdenek Salzman, James Stanlaw, & Nobuko Adachi (2015), Westview Press, ISBN 978-0-8133-4955-8

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1. Introduction

The origin of the Homo Sapiens (wise man in Latin) to which the modern human beings belong, goes back to 120,000 or even 400,000 years ago. The field that is concerned with studying biology and evolutionary history of Homo Sapiens and aims to distinguish human beings from other animal species is referred to as anthropology. The field has several branches. Cultural anthropology and linguistic anthropology are some of the examples. Cultural anthropology is referred to as ethnology.

The connection between culture and language has been an area of research for scholars and

researchers in more recent years. These studies have, eventually, led to the emergence of linguistic anthropology. It should be noted that anthropology or the science of humanity gained a self-conscious status towards the latter part of the 19th century. Franz Boas is amongst the main pioneers responsible in establishing this field as an academic discipline. He authored, co-authored and edited more than seven hundred publications (see Boas, 1938). His ideas and teachings have inspired scholars such as Edward Sapir who is largely credited as the founder of ethnolinguistics which studies the linkage between culture and language (For further information, see Sapir, 1949).

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This book (published by Westview Press, Colorado, 2015) investigates several aspects of language, culture, and their relationships within the society. The frequent references to the pioneers mentioned above and other scholars like Chomsky (1986), are prominent throughout the book.

A reasonable coverage of the key aspects of language, culture, and their connection is provided in the book. The book has been written in a style that is suitable for both academics and practitioners. The content is organized in fifteen chapters which follows a similar structure. For instance, in each chapter, introductory sections pave the way for further explanation and discussions. Each chapter concludes with consolidation in the form of a summary. There are also various projects and active learning exercises at the end of each chapter. These elements assist immensely in reinforcing the learning process.

2. Chapters 1, 2, 3, and 4: Linguistics and Linguistic Anthropology

These chapters which lay the foundations and describe the ideas, make it clear what is exactly meant by anthropology as an academic field.

Chapter 1 provides a description of linguistics in general and attempts to answer questions such as why one should study language and language in daily life. It then provides a brief history of anthropology, linguistics, and linguistic anthropology. The content clearly explains that an anthropologist is not someone who digs the ancient sites and burial grounds for artefacts or tries to decipher symbolic writings of the ancient civilizations.

Chapter 2 delves into contrasting linguistics with linguistic anthropology. The message regarding the difference between a linguist and a linguistic anthropologist is conveyed well. It is suggested that a linguist, compared with a linguistic anthropologist, is primarily interested in the language structure rather than the language changes over time.

Chapter 3 introduces the “nuts and bolts” of linguistic anthropology. The discussions make it clear that language is really all about sound. The anatomy and physiology of speech and

articulation of speech sounds are amongst the topics discussed.

Chapter 4 is related to the same topic and continues with discussions on “nuts and bolts” of linguistic anthropology. The chapter then moves on to introducing grammatical relationships and makes references to the transformational generative grammar.

A main message of these chapters is to explain that, linguistic anthropologists study the universal phenomenon of human language. The field of linguistic anthropology is therefore defined as the study of language in its biological and sociocultural contexts. The clarification that linguistics is the scientific study of language, paves the way for understanding that the field does not refer to the study of a particular language. It is explained that the purpose of linguistics is not to learn to speak a language; rather, it refers to the analytical study of language. The contrast between a linguist and a polyglot is also clearly spelled out. Hence, the reader would not perceive a linguist as an individual who can speak several languages fluently.

3. Chapter 5: Communicating Nonverbally

Chapter 5 is rather interesting as it covers nonverbal communication. It is suggested that, although spoken language is by far the most common and important means by which humans communicate with each other, it is not the only one. It continues discussions by suggesting that the various writing systems used throughout the world are of tremendous importance for communication. It is suggested that the term nonverbal communication, taken literally, refers to the transmission of signals accomplished by means other than spoken words. It is fascinating to read that even bodily gestures, facial expressions, and smoke signals have formed some of the nonverbal communication types throughout the history. The discussions then lead to the introduction of formal sign languages. It is suggested that, signing as a means of communication is, without any doubts, at least as old as speech. For example, the writings of ancient Greeks and Romans indicate that the deaf people utilized signs to communicate.

4. Chapter 6: The Development and Evolution of Language

Chapter 6 provides backgrounds to development of language. It includes topics on language, language birth, and language death. The process is very similar to the classic life cycle situation which the majority of natural and human made entities follow. The importance of communication in nonhuman species is considered to be quite vital to their survival. A reference to the classic communication's model is also provided. The model includes the sender, the receiver, and the message. A very interesting analogy on transmitting commands (in the form of gentle kicks) by the horse rider to the horse is given in this section of the chapter. An indication of the features of the early languages is given in this chapter. According to these arguments, most probably, the early languages combined visual and facial signals with auditory signals.

5. Chapter 7: Acquiring Language(s)

The discussions in Chapter 7 of the book revolve around methods of learning languages. The message that there is a distinction between learning the first language (the mother tongue) and a second language is very clear. As suggested in the chapter, most people know too well, learning to speak a foreign language is a demanding task. It involves coping with unfamiliar sounds and sound combinations and learning, grammatical rules different from those of one's native language. The discussions then lead into exploring the way children learn their first language. This learning process is totally different from learning a second language. Children are not really taught to speak the native language. They learn it by being exposed to others who talk to them. They do not learn grammatical rules separately but in context. They do not need to go to language laboratories or drill grammatical rules either.

As observed by the author, the reliance on the biologically innate language faculty or "Universal Grammar" has found a place in modern language learning. Some modern and innovative language teachers such as Thomas (2000) have suggested that grammar should be learnt in an approach very similar to how a child learns the grammatical principles. Thomas (2000) has suggested that, initially for a

beginner learner, grammar should be limited to understanding what is meant by verbs, nouns and adjectives.

6. Chapters 8 and 9: How Languages are Classified

These two chapters are really tied to each other. In chapter 8, one can read about classification of languages and how and why sound changes occur. It is established that the sound changes are gradual. It is argued that sound changes affect only the more frequently used words initially and only later, they can have an impact on other words. As mentioned in chapter 9, the speech pattern of one individual is somewhat different from the speech pattern of the next even for the same language. A fascinating discussion takes place in chapter 9 which suggests that people who live in the same geographic area, probably, have similar occupations, same education or economic status. Hence, they would share similar characteristics in comparison with people outside their region and over time they would develop their own dialect. According to Gordon (2006), there are probably more than 6900 languages worldwide. This figure, however, cannot be confirmed.

7. Chapters 10, 11, and 12: Ethnology and Culture

These chapters deal with the scientific description of the customs and cultures of different people. For instance, in chapter 10, ethnology of communication, speech community, and units of speech behavior are amongst the main topics. Chapter 11 goes on to discuss culture as cognition, and culture as categorization. In Chapter 11, it is argued that, words are basic to all communication as children first learn words when acquiring their language. It is also interesting to read that knowledge of a very small number of words can sometimes get one a long way even if the command of other aspects of the language are limited.

8. Chapters 13 and 14: Language, Identity, and Ideology

These two chapters address aspects related to: language, identity, and ideology.

Chapter 13 includes information on language and gender. Very interesting discussions relate to the distinction between grammatical gender and sex. Lexical elements such as pronouns ‘she’ and ‘hers’ vs ‘he’ and ‘his’ and nouns like ‘Latina’ and ‘Latino’ in Spanish, or French ‘chat’ and ‘chatte’ for male and female cats are some examples of biological genders. Grammatical genders, however, do not have much to do with the actual sex of the object. For instance, in German, ‘knife’ is ‘das Messer’ (with a neutral definite article) and ‘spoon’ is ‘der Loeffel’ (with a masculine definite article). Similarly, Romance languages have different genders for different words. For instance, in French, ‘La table’ is the ‘table’ (with feminine definite article) and ‘le bus’ is the ‘bus’ (with masculine definite article). The chapter also makes a reference to an observation that in languages with prominent gender distinctions, physiological gender equalities in the society are also more evident.

In the content, there are interesting discussions on how men and women differ in the use of language. Inclusion of further specific examples for a few languages would certainly make it more interesting for the reader. To complement the discussion, the author provides some examples of the certain words and expressions, which are reserved for men and women in Japanese. The expression signifying ‘you see’ (hey, you know) is ‘ano ne’ in Japanese; and it is often used by women. Similarly, to say ‘I’, women tend to use ‘atashi’ and men ‘boku’.

Chapter 14 addresses how and why people speak differently even if they speak the same native language. At this stage, one can make a comparison with similar types of discussions presented in Chapter 9. The differences in speaking (dialects) which were mentioned in Chapter 9 are, however, mainly due to differences in geographical areas. It is argued that, perhaps, social class is a main contributory factor towards differences in the style of speaking in a community. This attribute should, however, be phrased as differences in economics, education, familial prestige, or some other ways people might rank themselves in society. The chapter also covers how race and ethnicity affect the way people speak.

9. Chapter 15: Linguistic Anthropology in a Globalized World

This chapter covers issues on topics related to linguistic anthropology in a globalized world.

Chapter 15, under “Always on: New Literacies and Language in an Online Global World” discusses the impact of the emerging technologies on our language and the way it results in a change on how we think and relate to others (For details see Baron, 2008).

The section addresses the question of what our linguistic life is like now that we are “always on”. As a result of the modern technologies, sociolinguistic, formal syntactical, and grammatical changes have taken place. For instance, the manner in which people can express their feelings and opinions in the world of digital communication is very different from the actual face to face one. Communication, in the form of conversation, is being, in many instances, replaced by fast finger gestures on the screen of smart phones. The role of technology in shaping both language and culture is significant. Technology and computing power is advancing at an exponential rate. As a result, new and totally different means of communication and information sharing methods are becoming available.

The author believes that, the future editions of the book should allocate additional sections to address the impact of technology on both language and culture. At the time of writing this review, Apple’s latest and very innovative product, Apple Watch has just been released. This wearable device will certainly add a totally different dimension to the styles of communication in general. Just imagine the ability to communicate without words and instead, with gentle taps on wrists and images representing the exact feelings (e.g., heartbeat).

10. Additional Considerations

Incorporating a brief discussion based on the following, would help the novice reader:

It should be noted that linguistics is, traditionally, concerned with semantics, syntax, and phonology. The linguistic theory was originally studied by the Greek philosophers in

the 5th century B.C. Dionysus Thrax was probably one of the first scholars to embark on documenting the Greek grammar in the 1st century B.C. The Romans later used the Greek ideas as a basis for Latin grammar. The evolution of ideas led to the development of a theory for universal grammar by Chomsky (1986). His ideas stemmed from challenging the structuralist program and instead putting forward the Transnational Generative Grammar. His ideas were, later, laid the foundations of anthropological linguistics.

Based on the author's observation, it would also be interesting to consider discussions related to the following points:

What are the implications and consequences of moving towards a monolingual and monocultural world? The first question which should be paused is whether or not this situation is materialising. With the current popularity of English as a common language around the world, one would assume that there is a trend towards this target. In order to seek the answers, firstly, one needs to examine the reasons for English in gaining the common language status globally. The reasons for the English language's global spread can be attributed to some of its key features. Firstly, English is the language of several powerful and highly industrialized countries. Secondly, it is the main language of blockbuster movies, television programs, popular songs, and to a large extent, the Internet content. Thirdly, English is a relaxed and barrier-free language with a relatively straight forward grammar. Unlike the Latin based languages, it does not have the complexities associated with grammatical gender of the nouns and complex conjugation of verbs. In English, there is only one type of the second person pronoun which covers both formal and informal cases. As a result, the possibilities of being on the first name basis, in a barrier-free manner, is not a complex issue. It can, however, become a very difficult language if it is intended to be used for speaking, reading, and writing at higher levels and standards.

There are many peculiarities and complexities associated with how to spell and pronounce words in English. Millions of people whose mother tongue is not English can speak some English, but not all of them think in English like

the native English speakers do. Hence, when different people from different linguistic backgrounds speak to each other in English, several mental conversion processes take place on both sides of the speaker and listener. It would be appropriate to make a reference to the idea that the language one speaks determines how one perceives the world (Chapter 12). As a result, some subtiles in expressing the true intentions would not be possible. As an example, one could consider how certain cultures, such as the Japanese, avoid the use of negation in their responses. In other words, a negative response is not directly and bluntly delivered to the listener. When a Japanese person does not favour something or a situation, the expression could be "Sore wa cho-tto-" with a pause. It literally means 'Regarding that one, I, a little bit ...?' In a language like English or German, feelings of negation and dissatisfaction can be directly, and without any hesitation, accepted as normal. Therefore, for two people from different cultural backgrounds, to better understand each other's cultures, some basic knowledge of each other's languages can be beneficial.

11. Concluding Remarks

All the fifteen chapters and topics within them, are well structured and presented. Inclusion of a summary at the end of each chapter is a strength for this book. The included activities in chapters reinforce the learning process. The message that there is a strong connection between culture and language is clearly conveyed to the reader. The contrast between linguistics and linguistic anthropology is presented right from the start.

It would be appropriate to state that language has allowed human beings to draw on images of nature and convey the thoughts to others. The reason for, and purpose of, why to study languages and how to learn them is adequately covered. In dealing with why one should study language, a reference to Crystal (1971) would be relevant. As described in the content, Crystal (1971) points out that communication between patients and physicians can be extremely difficult given the differences in training and perspective of the persons involved.

Throughout the book, the writing style maintains an adequate balance in terms of

suitability for an academician or layperson. The content makes frequent references to a number of forerunners such as Franz Boas, Edward Sapir, and Noam Chomsky in establishing the foundations of the disciplines related to anthropology, linguistic anthropology, language, and culture. Discussions on how technology influences language and people's behaviour are provided. In conclusion, this book can serve as a suitable reading material for anyone who wishes to find out about the fascinating relationships between language and culture.

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