

Preface

In the winter of 1998, I volunteered to organize an “educational” session on the state of the art in linguistic anthropology for the Annual Meetings of the American Anthropological Association, to be held in December in Philadelphia. The session, one of a series for each of the major subfields in anthropology, was meant to inform the AAA members on contemporary research in linguistic anthropology.

I thought that the best way to accomplish this goal was to invite as many people as possible to talk about what they knew best about language matters in anthropology. As the number of contributors and topics grew, I realized that despite the three hours and forty five minutes allotted for the session, there was not going to be sufficient time for a series of fifteen minute papers. One solution was to limit the time of each presentation to seven minutes. That is how the idea of papers structured as entries of a lexicon emerged. I asked each author to write about one thousand words on one key concept in the study of language. The result was a very original and thought-provoking series of statements that kept the audience at the AAA meetings engaged for almost four hours (the room was filled beyond capacity and many people could not get in). After the session, I decided that the papers should be collected and published. Free from the temporal constraints of the meetings, I also realized that I could include other topics and authors. As I approached more colleagues or wrote again to those who had not been able to participate in the session because of previous commitments, the list grew to include about ninety potential contributors. Of those to whom I wrote, the great majority responded with enthusiasm, despite the short notice and the close deadline I had set. The question then arose as to where to publish the papers. I thought that the *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* would be the ideal place to publish the entries. Under editors Ben Blount and Judith Irvine, the journal has acquired a reputation for high quality contributions in a wide range of research topics and paradigms within our field. This special issue expands on that heritage, with an ambitious collective attempt to push the boundaries of our discipline even further into realms that just a generation ago would not have been thought of as linguistic anthropology. The contributors to this issue give voice to research programs and intellectual agendas that, each in their own unique way, celebrate the complexity and the richness of language as the ever present instrument and living record of the human experience on Earth.

Most of the contributors to this volume are linguistic anthropologists, but there are also colleagues from other fields, including folklore, linguistics, philosophy of language, psychology, sociology, ethnomusicology, conversation analysis, biological anthropology, and medical anthropology. Although not everything you always wanted to know about linguistic anthropology—or language—is represented here, the entries and authors in this issue cover

a vast territory of knowledge about linguistic matters. They are written to inform, suggest, provoke, and open up new horizons while looking back at our relatively short, no more than a century-long, history. If they succeed in engaging the readers with new ideas and making them reconsider or deepen their views of language matters, they will have accomplished their goal.

This special issue required a considerable amount of work by many people. I want to thank all the contributors for their willingness to adapt to the format of the entries and the strict deadlines without losing their creativity. The original session was made possible by the encouragement of the 1998 Annual Meetings Program Chair, Susan Greenhalgh, and the hard work of Lucille Horn at the AAA office in Arlington. In editing the issue, corresponding with the contributors, and making sure that I would not forget anything or anyone, I was fortunate to have the support of three skillful and energetic editorial assistants, Adrienne Lo, Sarah Meacham, and Vincent Barletta. Finally, this was my first collaboration with the publication staff at the AAA headquarters. Many thanks to Senior Production Editor John Neikirk, Composition Manager Neda Ross-Fleming, and the rest of the staff who made this at first improbable enterprise something that you can hold in your hands and read.

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The *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* is the journal of the Society for Linguistic Anthropology, a section of the American Anthropological Association, 4350 N. Fairfax Drive, Arlington, VA 22203.

ISSN 1055-1360

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