

Space

Space is an integral part of social life and language events and is an important resource in the ordering of social experience. The distribution of space can instantiate particular systems of social control, for example, conventionalizing differences between people, and making such delineations material and substantive, as well as anchoring them within historical practice. Space is central in the creation and communication of status and power relations in many cultures; Michel Foucault analyzed the role of space in social disciplining, for example, in restricting the mobility and access of certain members of society. Space and its phenomenological counterpart place are used widely in the construction of gender relations, as feminist geographers and anthropologists have described. Limitations on access and mobility are directly related to the acquisition of particular knowledge domains and often to participation in political process; certain spatial configurations can make linguistic participation by some members impossible.

In investigating the social uses of space, the relationship between place, participation, and particular speech practices is important. Who can speak here? What kinds of communicative interactions are appropriate here? How do individuals organize themselves temporally and spatially in an event? Charles Frake's discussion of the Yakan house in the Philippines is emblematic of some of the culture specific complexities of spatial arrangements and their relation to linguistic practice. He shows that a house, even a one-roomed Yakan house, is not just a physical space, but a structured sequence of settings where events are understood not only by the position in which they occur but also by the positions the actors move through, the manner in which they make those moves, and the appropriate language practices. Communicative interaction takes place in particular places, and language practices are partly defined by the spatial boundaries within which they occur.

Houses are constitutive of principles of social organization in all societies. Buildings are typically organized as systems of social relations, e.g., into male and female sides or areas, public vs. private, sleeping places according to age or marital status, etc. Some settings index meaning in particular ways, other spaces are settings for a wide variety of events, so that different meanings are mapped onto the same location at different times. In some societies it is common to find different spaces allocated for different speech events—rooms for classes, structures for religious observances, buildings for litigation, entertainment, etc. Looking at the specifics of the built environment or built forms and the specialized activities that surround these forms includes looking at places such as plazas and pathways. Space is not only organized according to locally situated representation practices, but serves as a model for reproducing such forms. However, the notion of space is not necessarily static or self-regulating. One question to be addressed is how the meaning of space is reframed when the same space is used for very different activities.

Spatial relationships and spatial frames of reference are construed not only through the organization of daily life, but through grammatical properties inherent in languages. Linguistic resources for expressing spatial relations are multiple, for example, directional particles, prepositions, nouns, verbs, and possessive constructions. Those studying grammatical encodings of spatial relationships have described some correlations between how language encodes space and other non-linguistic cognitive operations, such as solving spatial puzzles. This research centers on how differences in semantic structure concerning spatial relations relate to properties of conceptual structure, and how cognitive practices come to be shared through encoding in language. Deixis is another area of great interest to linguistic anthropologists looking at the role of space, since context adds crucial specificity for the interpretation of deictic forms.

The significance of a particular location in space emerges through complex relational processes that link it to other locations. Horizontal and vertical relations are particularly salient ways to reflect asymmetrical social relationships between individuals. The cultural valuing of the right side over the left is extremely common, though not universal. This privileging of one side of the body constructs asymmetry out of a mirror-like symmetry. Relationships between lexical expressions such as "above" and "below," "front" and "back," and "east" and "west" are regularly used to link arbitrary differences between members of society to the physical environment. Above is more highly valued than below, front is often more highly valued than back.

Space is, of course, an important resource for sign language. Space is used to contrast event time or to express hypotheticals and counterfactuals. Shifts in head and body orientation index imaginary locations of quoted speakers and also index intended addressees. Spatial concepts are regularly used in both spoken and signed languages as resources in representing ideas about time, music, mathematics, emotions, and social structure including kinship. This has led to the view that spatial conception is central to human thinking.

Space has an important relationship to codified knowledge in some communities. Ingjerd Hoëm describes how in Tokelau (Polynesia), elders take children on tours around the atoll, using particular sites to organize their recitation of historical narratives. Such situated spatial tellings themselves create specific notions of space. Geographical knowledge is also reproduced in songs and speeches. Similarly, for the Pintupi and other aboriginal Australian groups, space is an important component of The Dreaming, through which time, human action, and social processes are understood and interpreted. Particular places are linked to ancestral power and ideas of truth.

Space is a resource with different communicative properties than language. In Pohnpei (Micronesia), where the social structure is regularly displayed through seating position in the community feast houses, space indicates a person's hierarchical relation to others in way that can amplify or resist linguistic constructions of status. In Samoa, space can be a more important marker of status than language. Ideas about authority or privilege can be communicated as well as contested through not only language but through forms of spatial organization.

Some work on the social meaning of space is structuralist in orientation, based on the idea that space communicates polarities that are reified through other cultural expressions, but recently this has been criticized for an interpretation that is often too static and ahistorical. Other work emphasizes the situated meanings that emerge out of a complex relation between sign systems, visual (space and the body) and aural (voice). One of the newest aspects of space of interest to anthropologists is virtual space, and how this space constrains and enables new forms of discourse and interaction.

(See also *gesture, grammar, indexicality, participation, power, relativity, signing, theater, truth, vision*)

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