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Grammar

If the term *grammar* elicits in the average anthropologist a reaction of fear and loathing, perhaps the "ugly grammarian" needs a new image—or, more precisely, the role grammar currently plays within anthropology needs explaining. Many anthropologists have become alienated from grammar ever since certain linguists convinced them that a new field called linguistics was taking over. Henceforth, work on grammar would preferentially be abstract, idealized, decontextualized, technical, and self-referential—and, incidentally, devoid of implications for culture. If grammar is exclusively technical, then only technicians need apply. If grammar describes only internal relationships among linguistic categories, then it cannot illuminate anything outside itself. If grammar is universal, then it cannot tell us anything of ethnographic interest about how one local culture differs from another.

But there are other ways to see grammar, even to coax grammar into throwing light on anthropological questions. Actually, such optimism has always guided the work of linguistic anthropologists, as they have consistently found ways to make grammar speak to the theoretical concerns of the day. Confirming grammar's pervasive and multiplex interpenetration with culture, the yield has often been rich. Today anthropologists who "mind their grammar" can tap a broad array of newly elaborated conceptual tools and theoretical perspectives for understanding grammar in culture and practice. Just as important, the technical requirements for doing anthropologically interesting work with grammar are within the reach of the general anthropologist. Grammar needs anthropology as much as anthropology needs grammar. Anthropologists can help illuminate how social actors use grammar to enact culture, for example. The anthropological voice has never really been silent in this century, and its continued insistence that language is intrinsic to culture, and culture to language, has recently born fruit in an extraordinary revitalization of research in linguistic anthropology.

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To study grammar is to study culture—because, as Sapir reminds us, grammar *is* culture. Culture is a dangerous word nowadays, and linking it with grammar may not improve its image. But this concept may be turned to advantage if we undertake a re-vision of grammar, and consequently of culture, in light of Sapir's idea of the "carrying-power" of pattern as its "propensity to embrace new experiences or cultural elements within its framework." Pattern derives from practice. Just as linguists must abstract away from specific acts of speaking to capture grammatical pattern, anthropologists abstract away from the behavioral flux to capture cultural pattern.

Re-conceiving grammar as *patterned speaking* allows us to revisit the traditional anthropological approaches to grammar, and to situate them now within the modern conception of discourse, taken broadly as the use of language and other symbolic systems in social life. Grammar comes to life in discourse, where its pervasive mediating role touches virtually every aspect of social life.

Grammar goes everywhere. In a given speech community the same grammar promiscuously participates in acts as diverse as intimate persuasion, work, gossip, sanction enforcement, religious speculation, joking, aesthetic play, and a host of other ways of living. Paradoxically, it is grammar's abstractness that frees it to move across domains to mediate the organization of so many and so varied aspects of social life. Grammar mediates, and thus partly organizes, knowledge, information, social relations, texts, institutions, interactional practice, and more. Grammar organizes knowledge and cognition. Grammar is both reflection and instrument of a community's specific scheme for categorizing its phenomenal environment. Whorf showed how grammar's "obligatory categories" lead speakers to certain "forced observations," as when your grammar obligates you, whenever you use a verb, also to choose an evidential marker. Obligatory categories are always few yet pervasive, and thus influential. They continually demand attention to the distinctions they encode. Grammar organizes social relations. Here obligatory categories may directly index status—for example, forcing continual monitoring, via overt grammatical encoding, of the speaker's status relative to the addressee's (as in the "power and solidarity" discrimination enforced by pronoun or agreement systems in many languages). Even where social relations are *not* classified via obligatory grammar, the very absence of coding may reflect local ideologies of egalitarian self-presentation. Grammar organizes information. The speaker who seeks to impart new information must relate it to shared background to make it interpretable. Grammar provides an architecture for the structured differentiation of new information from given information. Local grammars evolve diverse yet comparable solutions, resolving competing universal and local culture-historical demands to legislate seemingly self-evident local organizations of information. Grammar organizes texts, contributing to the rich structure of parallelism in poetry, oratory, and even conversation. Grammatical parallelism iconically diagrams culturally presupposed equations, manifesting otherwise unspoken classifications for young learners to grasp. Grammar's role reaches beyond the present text's internal structure access meanings embedded in distant prior texts—understood as cultural

resources invokeable within a community of textual culture—and grammatically reshape them to fit the present context. Grammar organizes interaction. The structure of participation in talk is mediated in part by grammatical structures—combined with intonational, gestural, and other cues—that shape turn organization, nominate speech event participant roles, invoke speech event sequence expectations, and so on.

Admittedly, culture is a risky word these days. But if we conceive culture as *pattern that gives meaning to social acts and entities* and recognize that grammar *is* culture, we can start to see precisely *how* social actors enact culture through patterned speaking and patterned action.

On this re-vision of language and culture, the abstracting power of grammar serves not to generate an infinite unordered list of sentences, unconnected and unconnectable to what surrounds them, but to bridge the gulf that might separate us, one participant from another, present from past, social actor from cultural resource. Whether we engage in collaboration or conflict, grammar embraces abstraction to let us engage across particularities. If the pattern concept of culture (or grammar) were to elude us and social life fragment into a litany of isolated behaviors (or isolated sentences), we would lose our capacity to engage with others in the creation of meaning. The exceptionally fluid, encompassing, and creative forms assumed by grammar, seen in its natural ecology of dialogic interaction, provide a glimmer of a more general model of culture that can encompass convergence and contestation, sociality and individuality, systematicity and change, in which the mediating structures of patterned speaking and patterned action make possible the dynamic constitution and evolution of multiplex social life.

(See also *codes, community, competence, functions, ideology, participation, particle, poetry, reconstruction, syncretism, socialization, variation*)

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