

Culture & Communication

Alessandro Duranti

Anthropology 4, Winter 2021

Lecture 12: Agency, Intentionality, Responsibility

Today

1. **“Objectivity”** in anthropology and the social sciences in general
2. **Agency**
 - 2.1 Encoding of agency in languages
 - 2.2. English vs other languages
 - 2.3 A Universal Definition
 - 2.4 Mitigation of agency

Objectivity

Is objectivity possible? What is it?

Subjective vs. Objective

Intersubjective

Bracketing & Suspension of judgment (ἐποχή)

Examples of research questions & projects:

What can we study, investigate?

From the NYT, Feb. 21, 2021

- **Merrick Garland Faces Resurgent Peril After Years Fighting Extremism**
- The fallout from the Capitol attack and the shadow of the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing are likely to take center stage at the confirmation hearings for President Biden's pick for attorney general.

WASHINGTON — Judge Merrick B. Garland always made a point of wearing a coat and tie when he surveyed the wreckage at the site of the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, the worst domestic terrorist attack in American history.

He had been dispatched from Washington to oversee the case for the Justice Department, and he told colleagues that he viewed his daily uniform as a gesture of respect for a community left devastated after [Timothy J. McVeigh](#) placed a 7,000-pound bomb in a Ryder truck and [blew up the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building](#), killing 168 people, including 19 children.

“It really looked like a war zone,” Judge Garland said in recalling the destroyed and still-smoldering building, part of an oral history he participated in for the Oklahoma City National Memorial and Museum. “The site was lit up like a sun, like the middle of the day.” The worst part, he said, was seeing the demolished day care center. “There was nothing there,” he said. “It was just a big empty concave.” His own daughters were 4 and 2 at the time.

The Oklahoma City case, he later said, was “the most important thing I have ever done in my life.



The Oklahoma City bombing in 1995 killed 168 people, including 19 children. Associated Press

When President Biden nominated Judge Garland last month to be attorney general, the news conjured up his ordeal in 2016 as President Barack Obama's [thwarted nominee to the Supreme Court](#). But Judge Garland's experience prosecuting domestic terrorism cases in the 1990s was the formative work of his career, from the nuances of federal statutes down to the feeling of broken glass crunching beneath his dress shoes.

The man has now met the moment. At his Senate confirmation hearings starting on Monday, he will almost certainly be asked about [the Department of Homeland Security's warning](#) that the United States faces a growing threat from "violent domestic extremists" and that the Jan. 6 mob attack on the Capitol may not have been an isolated episode. In a strange, or perhaps fateful, turn of events, [the news leaked](#) that Judge Garland was Mr. Biden's pick for attorney general [only hours before the deadly riot](#). Mr. Biden formally nominated him for the position the next day.

"He has seen this hatred up close and in a very personal way," said Donna Bucella, a former Justice Department investigator who worked with Judge Garland in Oklahoma City. In the oral history, Judge Garland recalled the "stone cold" demeanor of Mr. McVeigh and his chilling absence of emotion. "There was just no indication from him that he had any feelings about what had just happened," Judge Garland said.

Reading emotions

The important point for an anthropological understanding of this kind of situation is not whether the defendant was in fact feeling no emotions or, more specifically, no remorse.

This is not something that can be investigated beyond personal opinions we might have based on the scant information we have.

What we can investigate is the noticing by particular individuals of a particular behavior of the defendant and the meaning that the interpretation of that behavior has for the jury or others in the trial or in the public opinion.

What can we learn from languages?

Grammarians (e.g., syntacticians) are interested in what sentences reveal about what a human language can be like, what languages encode, how they form sentences (e.g., variation in word order).

They are also interested in how to represent native speakers' knowledge of grammar (grammatical *competence*) through particular categories (e.g., nouns, verbs, adverbs, or Subject, Object, or Agent, Patient, Instrument, etc.).

Linguistic anthropologists are interested in what utterances, specific words, and their grammar reveal about the speakers' beliefs, attitudes, social world, emotions, and ethics.

Agency

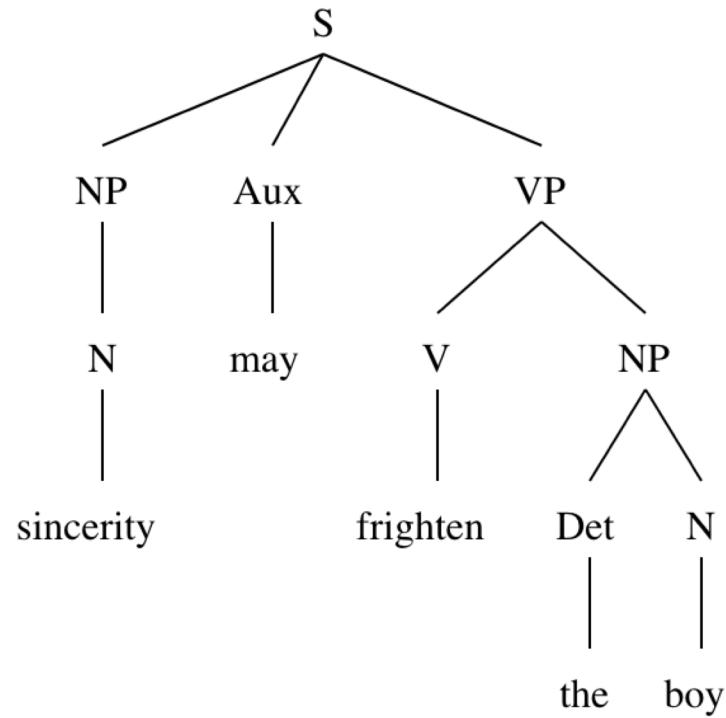
One of the ways in which people represent their understanding of a situation or event is in their encoding of agency, that is, of who did what to whom.

The encoding of agency says something about the speaker (e.g., indexes his or her stance toward events or people)

and

can also affect how the listeners or readers understand the events and protagonists being described.

Grammatical vs. Communicative Competence



From N. Chomsky (1965) *Aspects of the theory of syntax*. MIT Press, p. 65.

We start from simple sentences

The Subject role and position in English

(4) The boy broke the window.

(5) The window broke.

(6) The rock broke the window.

(7) The boy walks to the house.

(8) The boy is happy.

What is the SEMANTIC ROLE of the Subject?

(4) The boy broke the window. (Who is doing the breaking?)

(5) The window broke. (Who is doing the breaking?)

(6) The rock broke the window. (Who is doing the breaking?)

(7) The boy walks to the house. (What is the boy doing?)

(8) The boy is happy. (How is the boy feeling?)

Semantic roles of Subject of sentence

- (4) The boy broke the window with a rock. (The boy = Agent)
- (5) The window broke. (The window = Object or Patient)
- (6) The rock broke the window. (The rock = Instrument)
- (7) The boy walks to the house. (The boy = Actor) (Actor $\not\cong$ Agent)
- (8) The boy is happy. (The boy = Experiencer) (Experiencer \neq Actor and Agent)

Active and Passive voice in English

- (4) The man knocked down a wall with his car. (Active with human Agent as Subject)
- (5) The car knocked down a wall. (Active with Instrument in Subject position)
- (6) A wall was knocked down by a car. (Passive with Instrument expressed)
- (7) The man's car knocked down a wall. (Active with unclear role of human participant)
- (8) A wall was damaged by a car driven by a man (Passive with Instrument and Agent)

Etc.

Subject as Agent (NYTimes Jan. 14, 2019)

China Sentences a Canadian, Robert Lloyd Schellenberg, to Death.

Subject – Agent (*China*)

Active Verb (*sentences to death*)

Object – Patient (*a Canadian, Robert Lloyd Schellenberg*)

Possible alternative descriptions

- 1) China Sentences a Canadian, Robert Lloyd Schellenberg, to Death (NYT)
- 2) Canadian, Robert Lloyd Schellenberg, was sentenced to Death by Chinese court.
- 3) Canadian, Robert Lloyd Schellenberg, was sentenced to Death in China
- 4) A Canadian was sentenced to death. (Agent-less passive)
- 5) Canadian is found guilty in capital case **in** China. (Agent-less passive + Locative)

Etc.

China Sentences a Canadian, Robert Lloyd Schellenberg, to Death (NYTimes Jan. 14, 2019)

BEIJING — China's diplomatic clash with Canada escalated sharply on Monday, when a Chinese court sentenced a Canadian to death for drug smuggling at a one-day retrial ordered weeks after a Chinese executive's arrest in Canada.

In announcing the death penalty against the Canadian, Robert Lloyd Schellenberg, the court, in the northeast city of Dalian, gave no indication that his sentence might be reduced to prison time.

Mr. Schellenberg's fate could become a volatile factor in diplomacy between Beijing and Ottawa in the aftermath of the arrest by Canadian authorities of a Chinese technology executive in British Columbia last month — a move that incensed the Chinese government.

Mr. Schellenberg had appealed a 15-year prison sentence for smuggling methamphetamines. But during his retrial, against the backdrop of sharply increased tensions between China and Canada, the court sided with prosecutors who called for capital punishment.

Some Research Questions

DOES THE CHOICE OF WHAT IS IN SUBJECT POSITION MATTER?

DOES THE CHOICE OF EXPRESSING SOMETHING AS AN AGENT MATTER?

DOES THE CHOICE OF THE VERB VOICE (ACTIVE VS. PASSIVE) MATTER?

Next question: how do we decide whether it matters?

Non-human referents treated as agents (from newspapers)

- (20) A huge falling tree injured 20 people at Disneyland's Frontierland on Friday [...]
- (21) Rents jumped to record highs in Southland [...]
- (22) Arbitration claims against brokerage firms jumped sharply in April [...]
- (23) Tight security will keep the insects in.
- (24) Those funds helped support party activities [...]
- (25) The decision dealt another blow to claims by former senior TRW engineer Nina Schwartz.

More non-human referents treated as agents

- 1) The story was writing itself and I was having a hard time keeping up with it. (Ernest Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast*)
- 2) La peinture est plus forte que moi elle me fait faire ce qu'elle veut.
‘Painting is stronger than me it (‘she’) makes me do what it (‘she’) wants’
(Pablo Picasso, *Carnet 56*)
- 3) Die Stimmung macht offenbar „wie einem ist und wird“.
‘Mood makes manifest “how one is and is coming along”. (Heidegger, *Being and Time*)

Man drags dead raccoon into San Francisco McDonald's, forcing restaurant to close

By HANNAH FRY JAN 10, 2019 | 12:15 PM



A McDonald's in Pennsylvania. A San Francisco McDonald's was forced to close for two hours for a thorough cleaning after a man brought a dead raccoon into the restaurant Sunday. (Karen Bleier / AFP/Getty Images)

McDonald's golden arches greet diners from near and far, but a San Francisco location Sunday was forced to close for a thorough scrub-down after it received a most unwelcome



54°F San Francisco ▾ Search f

SFGATE ≡ SECTIONS

Man brings dead raccoon into a San Francisco McDonald's, forces location to close

By Amy Graff, SFGATE Updated 3:15 pm PST, Wednesday, January 9, 2019

[Email](#) [Facebook](#) [Twitter](#) [Pinterest](#) [Reddit](#) [Flipboard](#) 302



< >

Photo: Chris Brooks / Facebook Video Screen Capture

IMAGE 2 OF 5

A man carried a dead raccoon into a San Francisco McDonald's on the morning of Jan. 6, 2018.

A San Francisco McDonald's closed temporarily Sunday morning for a major cleaning operation after a man carried a dead raccoon dripping blood into the restaurant.

CITY & S

Dead animal shuts eatery

Bay Area McDonald's closed, sanitized for two hours after man sets raccoon on table.

BY HANNAH FRY

McDonald's golden arches greet diners from near and far, but a San Francisco location Sunday was forced to close for a thorough scrub-down after it received a most unwelcome guest: a dead raccoon.

A video taken by a customer and posted on social media shows a man seated in the restaurant's dining room with the dead animal on the table in front of him. McDonald's employees ges-



NEWPORT HARBOR'S JETTIES are bookended by 30-foot-tall pilings. Two watermen this week pitched ideas for remodeling them.

Ex-Pasadena

Earlier headline
Los Angeles Times, "City & State", B3 (1-12-2019)

English allows for a wide range of semantic roles for Subjects

- (1) Dead animal shuts eatery.
- (2) The house was waiting for us.
- (3) What is the book doing on the table?
- (4) The car is telling you that it needs a tune up.
- (5) The scandal killed the man.
- (6) Sincerity may frighten the boy (Chomsky 1965)

Question: is the Subject Noun Phrase treated AS IF it was an Agent?

Can you translate these sentences into other languages?

- (1) Dead animal shuts eatery.
- (2) The house was waiting for us.
- (3) What is the book doing on the table?
- (4) The car is telling you that it needs a tune up.
- (5) The scandal killed the man.
- (6) Sincerity may frighten the boy (Chomsky 1965)

Question: is the Subject Noun Phrase treated AS IF it was an Agent?

These sentences in Samoan are difficult to translate into English

`ua pō-gia mātou (pō ‘night’, -gia ‘passive suffix’)

Perf night-Pass we-pl-exclusive

‘we have been night-ed’ (‘we have been caught by the night’)

e le`i aso sā mai (aso ‘day’, sā ‘sacred, forbidden’, mai deictic)

Pst-Neg Sunday toward-Speaker

‘(they) didn’t spend Sunday here’

Possible semantic roles of Subject in English

- A) All languages have ways to express agency
- B) They also have ways to reduce, mitigate, or obfuscate agency

(Duranti 2001, 2004)

Does it matter? What is syntax doing?

(Recorded in a class where a Teaching Assistant explains why the books are not in the bookstore)

The books came in and they **were sent back**.

There was a mistake and they were sent back.

They had to be sent again.

(Duranti 2004: 465)

(Possibly avoiding blaming particular individuals or store for the lack of books)

A definition of “agency”

Entities are said to have agency, if they

- (1) have some degree of **control** over their own behavior,
- (2) engage in actions that **affect** other entities (and sometimes their own) and
- (3) are **evaluated** from a practical, aesthetic, and **moral** point of view for what they do and how they do it. (Duranti 2011: 156)

The moral point of view implies **responsibility**

Does it matter?

R: if, so for instance on number 1 future danger, if 12 jurors can't say that yes he's a future danger and if 10 jurors can't say no, he's not a future danger, then you simply don't answer the question.

J: yes.

R: and i'm just interested in how the, how you and the rest of the jurors kind of reacted to that=

J: =um=

R: =cause I thought it was an interesting sort of=

J: =well after, after we'd got some clarification from the judge, it was more, it was more understandable. Um, what they're trying to, what it is, what it tries to do is give less chance of a hung jury. Or when you say you can't answer that question, that means don't send that back to him as a verdict until you can get a verdict. So, like I said, you know we, we scratched our heads a little bit. What is this deal? So we asked for clarification. And it was explained, the judge explained it to us. And () that was it.

Isolating examples

- 1) after we'd got some clarification from the judge, (the judge = Source)
- 2) what it is, what it tries to do is give less chance of a hung jury (it = ?).
- 3) So we asked for clarification. (we (the jurors) = Agent)

And it was explained, (No Agent)

(self-correction)

the judge explained it to us. (the judge = Agent)

And () that was it.

[...]

J: =well no, the only thing uh on, and I don't recall the day, when we were
going into punishment phase. I don't recall whether it was the first day. I
just don't recall. But yes there was, because it was getting pretty hard-
headed. And getting a little touchy. And some people were getting, some
jurors were getting their feelings hurt. And I sent a note to the judge telling
him where we were.

Who is doing what

[...]

it was getting pretty hard-headed. (**no mention of who or what**)

And getting a little touchy.

And some people were getting-

(REPAIR: “some people” corrected to “some jurors”)

some jurors were getting their feelings hurt. (**Agentless Passive with get**)

And I sent a note to the judge telling him where we were. (Agent-Subject)

J: No I think everybody knew. I mean no, there was no question. There was never a question, for the simple reason the way, the way the jury shook out. Uh there was never a question of guilt or innocence. After we pr-
after the case was presented. But there was never a question, was he guilty was he not guilty. That never entered in to it. It, the only question was what was he guilty of.

R: right. Right.

J: uh, and like I said the way it, the what question, the way it shook out and the jury split, we were fairly sure we could reach a verdict.

R: mm hm. Um, so in the punishment phase, what did you, you said that you were sure of what would happen if it was a hung jury. So what were you sure of?

J: that he would go back where he was an- have a new, another trial. I mean there would be another trial. It'd be another year or two but he'd be back in the-, you know. But there'd be another trial and we'd go through the same thing again. Somebody would, we wouldn't but.

R: right. Um, and so do you remember, was there ever a point at which you said well, you know, we're gonna take three more hours to talk about it, and, or something, you know **some kind of plan** like that=

J: =well no, the only thing uh on, and I don't recall the day, when we were going into punishment phase. I don't recall whether it was the first day. I just don't recall. But yes there was, because **it was getting pretty hard-headed. And getting a little touchy**. And some people were getting, **some jurors were getting their feelings hurt**. And I sent a note to the judge telling him where we were. At what split we were. And asking to advise us. And uh, that confused hhhhhh not only him a little bit, but it confu- uh I, I talked to the uh, or the uh, the lead defense attorney talked to me yesterday. And uh it confused the heck out of him, he didn't know what, but the only thing that I, that I explained to the judge, and the only thing I (asked) I said do you want to, for us to quit and go home right now or you want us to keep thrashing? So he said keep thrashinghhhh. You know so. But yes there was a point where it, tempers were, and feelings and that sort of thing. And as foreman, I have absolutely no power whatsoever.

Uh there was never a question of guilt or innocence.

After we pr- after the case **was presented**.

Agentless Passive

But **there was never** a question.

Existential “be”

because **it was getting pretty hard-headed**.

Impersonal “it” (referent?)

And getting a little touchy.

Impersonal 3rd person

And some people were getting-

Agentless Passive “get”

some jurors **were getting their feelings hurt.**

Agentless Passive “get”

Further analysis

And I sent a note to the judge telling him where we were.

Agent Verb Object Goal + dependent clause (with gerund, -ing)

the lead defense attorney talked to me yesterday

Agent Verb Goal Adverb

... tempers were, and feelings and that sort of thing.

And as foreman, I have absolutely no power whatsoever.

Review

“**Objectivity**” in anthropology is made possible by “bracketing” our own common sense opinions, attitudes, and feelings in order to focus on particular actions (words included) of the participants and their interpretations (it is not what they mean to us but what those actions, words, etc. mean to them that interests linguistic anthropologists).

The encoding of **agency** in languages provides us with information about speakers’ point of view and their goals (e.g., how they do or do not want to present themselves or others as responsible agents).

