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Language, Interaction, and Culture

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Viewing language and culture within a unifying theoretical approach can be successful only if alternative options have been given due respect. Thus, this entry begins with theoretical approaches that define language as a (cognitive) competence unique to humans and located “inside” their minds or brains. This theory posits culture and interaction as “outside domains” in which language finds its application and usage.

An alternative theory of the relation between language and culture is also offered—one in which they mutually constitute and enrich each other. Within this theoretical approach, interactive practices—that is, those between speakers—are the domain wherein existing language structures are strengthened; simultaneously, interactive practices also contribute to gradual change in the formal properties of language.

Similarly, within this general approach, interactive practices are the means by which cultural belonging and membership categories are strengthened and simultaneously called into question and occasionally even subverted, resulting in the potential of cultures to gradually change. Thus, theorizing interaction as the central connective tissue between cultural and linguistic conventions opens a new and exciting area for inquiry into psychological phenomena such as interpersonal relations, personal identity, and the sense of self.

Language and Interaction

Languages differ. However, in principle, they all are learnable, and this is assumedly the case because each language follows a set of rules—rules that native speakers have acquired, typically as children and rather effortlessly, and are able to apply when communicating with other native speakers of the same language. Although they have “native understanding” of their language-specific rule system, they usually are not able to explicate it.

This is the business of linguists, and typically, their purpose is to find out what kinds of rules are shared by all languages—that is, are universal—and which rules are language specific, as well as differences in rule systems between regional dialects or between categories of gender, age, ethnicity, and the like. Whether universal rules exist and, if so, whether they actually have a material basis are matters of debate.

Although theorists who follow a traditional, structuralist approach to language maintain that linguistic structures can be studied from actual spoken-language corpora that have been recorded and transcribed (e.g., Ferdinand de Saussure and Kenneth Pike), the more widely accepted theory since the turn to cognitive processes in the 1960s is that the human mind or brain possesses language structures that enable speakers to produce evernewer units of language—even ones that have never been heard or spoken before (e.g., Noam Chomsky). In this way, the study of language became a part of cognitive psychology.

Theorizing about language as linguistic structures in the mind or brain was a reaction to behavioristic theorizing that viewed the human organism as responding to outside forces or stimuli, especially social stimuli, in learning to speak a language. Behind the subsequent turn to cognition were new psychological theories grounded in biology and evolutionary psychology (e.g., Steven Pinker) and, in contrast to behavioristic views, arguing for the person as a mindful and intentional being.

This turn inspired waves of new research, especially in language processing and language acquisition and in specialties such as language impairment, artificial intelligence, and

machine translation. However, these new theories resulted in a problematic split between language as the capacity to speak (linguistic competence) on the one hand and language in actual use (performance) on the other hand. Or put more directly, the object of inquiry with regard to language became almost exclusively the capacity to speak (competence) without a focus on the real-time speech of speakers embedded in real contexts. Furthermore, over time, it became obvious that speakers in their mundane and situated conversations actually deviate from theoretical rule systems but nevertheless are perfectly able to communicate effectively.

Language in Interaction

A very different tradition of theorizing about language, one that is more pertinent to social psychologists but also to clinicians and one that also views the person as an intentional, meaning-making agent, emerged in parallel to the cognitive theory and its focal interest in linguistic algorithms. This alternative view had roots in *symbolic interactionism* (George H. Mead and Herbert Blumer), in Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, in *speech act* and *discourse theory* (John Austin, John Searle, and Jonathan Potter), in movements in *ethnomethodology* (Harold Garfinkel and Erving Goffman), and in *conversation analysis* (Harvey Sacks and Emanuel Schegloff).

This broad orientation predominantly asks what people *do* when they use language: (a) how they regulate their interactional order with each other, (b) how they reach local understanding and intersubjectivity, (c) how they navigate their social relationships in terms of belonging with others and simultaneously differentiating themselves from others, (d) how they develop a sense of agency but simultaneously view themselves as affected by a world impinging on them from the outside, and (e) how they manage to view themselves across time as continuously changing while simultaneously holding onto an essential self that is unchanging.

This approach to language is deeply embedded and ultimately rooted in interaction and poses a number of potential difficulties for traditional theories of language that locate language in individual cognition. In addition, it attracts psychologists who are interested in the formation of social relationships as well as personal identity and sense of self.

A communicative, interactive approach to language aligns with broader theories of human development, such as the Vygotskian orientation toward language and language learning, inasmuch as it focuses on a theory that explains social (and individual) meaning making in terms of intentional and dyadic practice rather than innate structures. In addition, starting from the functional and semantic dimensions of linguistic communication, this usage-based approach to language, which is consistent with a usage-based theory of language acquisition (e.g., Michael Tomasello), is able to explain the emergence of linguistic structures from usage patterns, thus turning the cognitivist or nativist approach inside out in terms of both the phylogenetic development of language and the ontogenetic socialization process of the child.

Perhaps most relevant, the interactionist orientation changes the traditional focus for psychologists from the individual to the communicating dyad, with intentional interaction as the engine that facilitates change and development. Moreover, this orientation may turn out to be equally relevant for theorizing not only about language but also about human development more generally. That is, language in interaction is no longer the independent (cognitive) system that develops on its own due to its own specific learning device but is closely interwoven with (other) bodily practices of intersubjective sense making.

Finally, inquiry into language and language acquisition has to take place in vivo and in situ; that is, researchers have to get out of the practice of making up artificial sentences for use in laboratory investigations and then submitting them to native speakers in order to test hypotheses. Instead of decontextualized studies, by using the alternative framework, researchers directly investigate how humans interact with one another in everyday, mundane, and situated practices, often with the extensive use of nonverbal cues for the construction of meaning.

Language in Interaction: As Situated in Cultural Contexts

At this point, it should be apparent that the question of whether languages have common linguistic parameters—that is, language universals—has lost its centrality in the psychological study of language. Instead, the study of minute, fine-grained, interactively situated processes is moving onto center stage in research and theory. Although interactive practices typically follow certain routines in patterned usage, they operate on and are embedded in highly cultural traditions.

Consider, for instance, diverse routines such as greetings or leave takings, formal meetings or informal mealtimes, or classroom rituals. In all of them people routinely “know” how to coordinate their bodies and speech and to align them with the conversational other. They know how and when to take turns in conversations.

However, the particulars of how and when to perform a particular behavior appropriately—for instance, the handshake in a greeting routine—require the fine-tuning of all the following modalities: choosing what to say (as, for instance, a friendly “How are you today?” versus a more formal introduction) and synchronizing the verbal modality with hand and arm mutually reaching out to seize and shake the other’s hand, accompanied by a slight leaning forward and directing one’s gaze at the other’s eyes, along with a facial expression, usually in the form of a smile.

Again, although people know how to perform these modalities in vivo, and are able to tune them accordingly as they feel more or less familiar with the other (e.g., performing the greeting with a hug or just a head-nod), they also adjust to accepted cultural conventions that display rich cultural variation.

Irrespective of whether the conventions associated with different modalities of language use can be considered universally shared, the interesting aspects of how individuals piece together the different modalities and are able to modify and accommodate them to new situations underscore their flexibility and dynamism in situated practices. Moreover, as much as these interactions are confined by and conform to preexisting cultural norms and habits, the daily and mundane practices of language use also allow interlocutors to play with, challenge, and even subvert the boundaries that hold those norms and habits.

Thus, although it may be correct to argue that different cultures shape the ways of using language and that different ways of speaking shape the way cultures develop their worldviews, theorizing that both language and culture emerge from their particular interactive practices helps explain the evolution of cultural views of the world.

Relevance for Psychology

A psychology that traditionally centers on the individual and on relatively isolated persons

typically has little interest in interaction and culture. The theoretical push toward the relevance of interaction and culture for the construction of self and identity opens possibilities for theorizing in new and innovative ways. *Cultural, discursive, and narrative psychology* all center on issues of social relationship formation, personal identity, and the sense of self. Such work examines the way these phenomena are under construction in processes of social interaction.

Everyday and mundane interactive practices form the empirical field in which alignments with others and affiliations within membership categories (gender, race, age, etc.) take place. How people differentiate themselves from others but simultaneously form a sense of belonging is a central question for social and developmental psychologists. In addition, discursive psychologists investigate how people construct their agency and responsibility through interactive practices and attribute blame and guilt to themselves as well as to others. For narrative psychologists, narratives in interaction are the focus of study that is guided by the assumption that in interactive narratives, people form and practice identities that are continuous but simultaneously open to transformation and development.

See also [Behaviorism](#); [Cognition and Language](#); [Communication and Language](#); [Cultural Psychology](#); [Pinker on Language](#)

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Further Readings

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