

Agency and Anthropology: Selected Bibliography

Casey High



Édition électronique

URL : <https://journals.openedition.org/atelierslesc/8516>

DOI : [10.4000/ateliers.8516](https://doi.org/10.4000/ateliers.8516)

ISBN : 978-2-8218-0440-1

ISSN : 1954-3646

Éditeur

Laboratoire d'ethnologie et de sociologie comparative (LESC)

Référence électronique

Casey High, « Agency and Anthropology: Selected Bibliography », *Ateliers A & Ateliers LESC* [En ligne], 34 | 2010, mis en ligne le 27 septembre 2010, consulté le 12 avril 2024. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/atelierslesc/8516> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/ateliers.8516>

Ce document a été généré automatiquement le 12 avril 2024.



Le texte seul est utilisable sous licence CC BY-NC-ND 4.0. Les autres éléments (illustrations, fichiers annexes importés) sont « Tous droits réservés », sauf mention contraire.

Agency and Anthropology: Selected Bibliography

Casey High

- 1 The following bibliography identifies several areas of anthropology and linguistics in which questions of agency and agentivity have come into focus in recent years. It is divided into five separate sections that may be of interest to the group, with particular attention to topics addressed in meetings over the course of the past year. There is a considerable amount of overlap between the sections, which are designated based on theme, discipline, region and theoretical approach. The sections include brief descriptions of specific key texts and are followed by lists of references relevant to the given topic. Members of the group are invited to add further references to the lists with the aim of creating an ever-growing database for agency/agentivity related texts. You will notice that, given the composition of the group and my own background, the most extensive lists at present are those related to questions of agency in contemporary anthropology—especially in Amazonia. I have also given priority to recent and forthcoming work that I feel engages issues of agency in novel ways that might be relevant to the group, referring particularly to texts that have not appeared on previous reading lists that include primarily linguistics readings. I hope that this will form the basis of a list that will continue to incorporate further texts on these topics in the future.

1) Recent anthropological perspectives on agency

- 2 While debates about structure and agency have been a central concern in anthropology for decades, only in the past five years or so have anthropologists (particularly in the us) begun to question the philosophical assumptions that underlie academic interests in agency. The following texts take issue with the various ways in which agency has been used (both implicitly and explicitly) in anthropology and calls for greater attention to how specific ethnographic contexts may allow us to reformulate ideas about agency in new ways. While much of this theoretical turn has been inspired by

scholars working in the anthropology of religion, fields ranging from science studies to Amazonian ethnography have also come to question conventional assumptions about and uses of agency as a concept.

KEANE, Webb (2007) – *Christian moderns: Freedom and fetish in the mission encounter* (Berkeley, University of California Press).

This book traces the history of “agency” as a moral value in humanist philosophy and Christian theology. Keane situates anthropology’s quest for finding “local agency” since the 1970s within this broader history and argues that the concept is central to what he calls the “moral narrative of modernity”. Since notions of agency are often derived from deeply rooted assumptions about self-conscious, individual self-transformation and the “emancipated subject”, Keane suggests some of the problems with adopting this concept in studies of other cultural contexts. However, instead of dismissing agency altogether as an inherently “Western” concept, he instead explores ethnographically and historically how the colonial mission encounter in Indonesia involved a “struggle over agency” between Dutch Calvinist missionaries and local ritual specialists. His ethnography thus explores the conjuncture of radically different notions of agency that have played out in this context. Central to Keane’s argument is the idea that the missionaries rely on a distinction between materiality and spirits that constitutes a semiotic ideology which differs from local cosmology and religious practices. He uses Latour’s notion of “purification” in drawing out the separation between words and things, nature and culture, bodies and souls, and subject and object that constitute much of the ideological basis of modernity. Building on previous literature on language ideologies, Keane argues that these distinctions are constituted by semiotic ideologies that determine the ways in which speakers identify the relations between specific semiotic forms. By focusing on the materiality of semiotic forms, he suggests that such an approach allows us to better understand practices involving words and things.

KEANE, Webb (2003) – *Self-interpretation, agency, and the objects of anthropology: Reflections on a genealogy, Comparative studies in Society and History*, 45 (2): 222-248.

This article explores the genealogy of a specific “ethic” in the social sciences that emphasises human self-determination as a value. This can be seen, for example, in much anthropological writing in recent years that opposes reductionism and essentialism. Much like his book, the article pushes anthropologists to better recognise and take responsibility for the key concepts they use and promote, such as agency. In tracing this genealogy within anthropology, Keane describes how “agency” came to be seen in opposition to “structure” and “culture” itself. In particular, he points to the centrality of agency in the interpretive turn in anthropology, and argues that recent anthropological approaches ranging from the focus on individual subjectivity to global political economy have relied on a similar conceptual genealogy that values agency as “self-interpretation”. The article suggests that much debate in contemporary anthropology turns on the question of whether human self-determination or autonomy is located in the collective or the individual. Keane warns that, in focusing on questions of agency in our attempts to overcome age-old determinisms, we should be weary of simply identifying “freedom” with the domain of ideas.

MAHMOOD, Saba (2005) – *Politics of piety: The Islamic revival and the feminist subject* (Princeton, Princeton University Press).

This ethnography explores the particular kinds of “moral agency” that emerge in a Muslim women’s mosque movement in Egypt. The book develops a strong theoretical critique of the ways feminist anthropology and subaltern studies have conceptualised agency as a desire for freedom, autonomy and the subversion of social norms. Mahmood challenges the common Western assumption that Islamic patriarchy leaves little or no space for women’s agency. Drawing on Foucault and

Butler's work on subjectification, the book suggests new ways of thinking about "agency" beyond the notions of "resistance", which rely on a Western humanist expression of free will that is central to the meta-narrative of modernity. She suggests that instead of imposing our own assumptions about who or what has "agency", as anthropologists we should be open to understanding radically different concepts about responsibility, effectivity, and modes of being. Importantly, the book pushes us to consider how agency is located within structures of power, such that relations of subordination may create and enable people in unforeseen ways. Mahmood thus follows Foucault in viewing agency as a kind of "ethical formation" through which human subjects are transformed.

Related references:

ASAD, Talal (1996) – Comments on conversion, in P. Van der Veer (ed.) *Conversions to modernities: The globalization of Christianity* (New York, Routledge): 263-273.

DESAI, Amit (2010) – Dilemmas of devotion: Religious transformation and agency in Hindu India, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 16 (2) : 313-329.

POVINELLI, Elizabeth (2002) – *The cunning of recognition: Indigenous alterities and the making of Australian multiculturalism* (Durham, Duke University Press).

2) Relations between humans and non-humans

- 3 While several theorists have examined the philosophical and historical emergence of specific concepts of agency, scholars working in science studies and other fields inspired by Actor Network Theory (ANT) have contributed significantly to debates about how and in what contexts agency is attributed to non-human entities. This work is useful in considering what criteria come into play in different definitions of agency. ANT approaches may also provide an interesting comparison to recent studies of non-human agency in Amazonian shamanism.

TEUBNER, Gunther (2006) – Rights of non-humans? Electronic agents and animals as new actors in politics and law, *Journal of Law and Society*, 33 (4): 497-521.

Writing from the perspective of a legal scholar, Teubner examines how law and science create new possibilities for non-human agency. Drawing on Actor Network Theory (particularly Latour's notion of "personification"), the article considers the historical invention of legal personhood in order to understand how "action" is attributed beyond human people. Teubner argues that, by transforming subject-object relations into Ego-Alter relations, the personification of non-humans makes Ego's action possible in contexts where Alter is not transparent. He thus argues that this process constitutes a successful strategy for dealing with uncertainty about "others". This is because treating an object as an "actor" transforms uncertainty about causal relations into uncertainty about how the "other" will react to Ego's actions. As a result, Ego is then in a position to observe, react to, and draw consequences from Alter's reactions. To illustrate this process, the article uses the examples of internet transactions, legal processes, and other contexts where non-humans are attributed agency. Drawing on Latour's concept of human/non-human "hybrids" and Rammert's work on "gradualized" agency, Teubner describes the different degrees and contexts of non-human agency in diverse contexts, such as law, politics, science and religion. He concludes that "the personification of electronic agents creates new moral dilemmas", but predicts "an accelerated multiplication of actors within different worlds of meaning". Though presenting a highly functionalist approach to non-human agency, Teubner's work raises key questions about why agency is attributed to non-human entities in specific contexts of uncertainty. Such an approach may be relevant for understanding questions of agency in Amerindian shamanism, and particularly witchcraft, which often involve uncertainties and debates about relations between humans and animals.

Related references:

LATOUR, Bruno (1993) – *We have never been modern* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press).

LATOUR, Bruno (2005) – *Reassembling the social: An introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford, Oxford University Press).

3) Human and non-human agency in Lowland South America

- 4 In response to the recent proliferation of writing on perspectivism in Amazonia and elsewhere, a number of anthropologists working in South America have raised questions about gendered and generational forms of agency in Lowland South American shamanism and cosmology. These writings examine the kinds of agency attributed not only to plants and animals, but also to objects and music in diverse Amazonian contexts. Several authors have also questioned the separation between subject and object implied in some theorizations of perspectivism.

WALKER, Harry (2009) – Baby hammocks and stone bowls: Urarina technologies of companionship and subjection, in F. Santos-Granero (ed.), *The occult life of things: Native Amazonian theories of materiality and personhood* (Tucson, University of Arizona Press): 81-104.

This article examines the communicative potential of objects among the Amazonian Urarina, where baby hammocks and shamanic stones reveal the agency attributed to non-human entities. Walker critically assesses Viveiros de Castro's formulation of perspectivism, suggesting that a focus on predator/prey relations elides the importance of specifically gendered forms of personhood in Amazonia. He describes how material objects become "companions" to people through a process of familiarization, such that, like people, "things" transform over time and display different subjective states. While hammocks have an active role in forming the body of a child (and thus creating the person), stones are "domesticated" by male shamans through a productive relation of communication and exchange. Both of these objects cultivate personal identity through different models of agency. Walker suggests that since having a "master" is a prerequisite for personality and intentionality, 'taming' is not just about relations of "predation", but also the role of subordination in forming the subject. For example, when a shaman tames his stone, its power is converted into a condition of individual consciousness. Objects thus become agents for the transformation of humans. More generally, the article demonstrates "the contrastive and coexisting models of personhood and agency" in Amazonian cosmology. Walker's work is important for understanding the different kinds of agency attributed to objects, as well as providing a new perspective on how agency is construed in Amazonian cosmology beyond Viveiros de Castro's predator/prey model.

COURSE, Magnus E. (forthcoming) – Of words and fog: Linguistic relativity and Amerindian ontology, *Anthropological Theory*, 10 (3).

This article takes issue with the status of subjects and objects in anthropological formulations of Amerindian cosmology. It suggests that Viveiros de Castro's work on perspectivism is based on a view of "subjects" and "objects" as mutually exclusive identities, which Course argues is derived from the nominative-accusative nature of European languages. He points to the general problem of how the designation of "agent" and "patient" in linguistics has been adopted within philosophical and anthropological theorizing of subjects and objects. The article argues that the strong subject/object opposition common to many European languages is an analogy often represented as Amerindian reality. Basing his analysis on the observation that ergative languages allow entities to be both subjects and

objects, it argues that subjects and objects should instead be viewed as “points along a continuum of agency”. Whereas perspectivism is often understood as a struggle to impose one’s own perspective as subject, the article argues that the transformative qualities of Amerindian cosmology reveal the problems with adopting a strict subject/object paradigm in regional studies.

HIGH, Casey (forthcoming) – Warriors, hunters, and Bruce Lee: Gendered agency and the transformation of Amazonian masculinity. Under review at *American Ethnologist*, 37 (4).

This article examines the ways that young Waorani men in Amazonian Ecuador express specific generational forms of masculinity in reference to past violence, urban inter-cultural relations and global film imagery. By drawing on Amazonian and anthropological conceptualizations of “gendered agency”, it considers how male “fantasies” point to young men’s reduced capacity to demonstrate particular forms of agency associated with male elders and ancestors. However, such a “masculinity crisis” in the wake of social and economic transformation has not led to the gendered antagonisms and violence toward women familiar to studies of “hegemonic” masculinities in other parts of the world. The article illustrates how Amazonian notions of agency depart radically from conventional approaches to agency in anthropology, while at the same time examining the interaction between Amazonian and mestizo understandings of masculine agency in urban inter-ethnic contexts.

HIGH, Casey (forthcoming) – Shamans, animals, and enemies: Human and non-human agency in an Amazonian cosmos of alterity, in M. Brightman, V. Grotti and O. Ulturgasheva (eds.), *Personhood in the shamanic ecologies of contemporary Amazonia and Siberia* (Oxford, Berghahn).

This article explores Amazonian understandings of human and non-human agency in the context of Waorani shamanism, assault sorcery and regional inter-ethnic relations. It addresses Descola, Viveiros de Castro and Fausto’s work on animism and perspectivism, raising questions about the different kinds of agency and subjectivity attributed to various human and non-human “others” in Amazonian cosmology. Whereas theorizations of perspectivism generally turn on the idea of humans, animals and other non-human entities sharing a single “culture” in which being a “predator” denotes a highly agentive subject position, High draws on the work of Londoño Sulkin in pointing to the moral connotations of different perspectives. It looks specifically at relations of control, adoption, and domestication in Waorani shamanism, where the direction of agency has an important bearing on the moral status of shamanic practices. High argues that such ambiguities in relations between shamans and their adopted jaguar-spirits reveal the dangers associated with Waorani shamanism, allowing for a better understanding of its decline in recent decades. Whereas the moral position of shamanism has become increasingly untenable in Woarani communities, it is primarily human “enemies” (Quichua-speaking people) who today occupy the position of “predatory” others and perform shamanic curing for the Waorani.

FIORINI, Marcelo (forthcoming) – Desire in music: Soul-speaking and the power of secrecy, in J. Hill and J.-P. Chaumeil (eds.), *Burst of breath: Ritual flute music in Amazonia* (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press).

Fiorini’s paper examines the ways in which animal calls and flute music among the Nambikwara convey powerful messages between people separated by time and space. As such, sounds have the power to change the course of events and provide “personal empowerment” in everyday life. In particular, birds are attributed the ability to call the names of people, thus evoking an affective response on the part of the hearer. Like shamanism and flute music, bird calls are a “signifying practice” as well as a form of “communication” through which relationships between people and spirits are managed. Similarly, music holds the potential to “re-interpret” or transform situations into more significant events in which the interpreters themselves are allowed greater agency. Flute rituals, in which musicians are like

shamans in “reconciling spirits to bodies”, are closely associated with relations with “otherness”. Following Wagner’s work in symbolic anthropology, Fiorini describes musical tunes as a “manifestation” of what they stand for. Music thus produces animals, plants and persons insofar as it is seen as the “spirit” of these entities.

FAUSTO, Carlos (2004) – A blend of blood and tobacco: Shamans and jaguars among the Parakanã of Eastern Amazonia, in N. Whitehead and R. Wright (eds.), *In darkness and secrecy: The anthropology of assault sorcery and witchcraft in Amazonia* (Durham, Duke University Press): 157-178.

Based on an in-depth discussion of predation and alterity, Fausto argues for an intrinsic link between warfare and shamanism in Amazonia. He notes that among the Parakana, both shamans and jaguars are symbolically linked to cannibalism, since shamanism focuses on non-human “others” much in the same way that warfare concerns human “others”. Just as shamans “adopt” jaguars as pets through dreaming, killing human enemies is a form of predation in which the killer acquires or “consumes” the victim’s intentionality and subjectivity. These symbolic links illustrate why the shaman is seldom a publicly recognised position in Parakanã society. The danger in shamanism lies in the potential reversal of “familiarization”, in which shamans come to see their own kin as enemies when they surrender to the jaguar’s perspective, thus inverting the ideal master/pet relationship. The article identifies predation as a “hallmark of powerful agency” in Amazonia, where we find complex relations between human and non-human persons. Fausto’s work reflects a broader regional focus on perspectivist ontologies in which different beings struggle to acquire or assert a “surplus” of agency and intentionality.

FAUSTO, Carlos and Michael HECKENBURGER (eds.) (2008) – *Time and memory in Indigenous Amazonia: Anthropological perspectives* (Gainesville, University Press of Florida).

Focusing on the increasing interest in history and memory in Amazonian anthropology, the editors of this volume warn against the tendency in anthropology to project contemporary Western concerns with subjective experience, historical consciousness and individual agency onto the people we study. They suggest that much ethnography today attributes “history” and “agency” to Amerindian people in an attempt to “morally upgrade” them to the status of “real people”. The book’s introduction distinguishes between two conventional ways of understanding agency in anthropology: one is agency as a “universal human quality”; the second is a “culturally defined quality” that can only be defined in terms of native practices and ontologies themselves. They contrast the Western emphasis on “having history” as a hallmark of agency to Amerindian understandings of shamanic action in which transformation is understood as requiring interactions between various human and non-human agents. The argument is that we should be careful not to assume an ontological separation between humans and non-humans that simply reproduces our own notions of agency. In the Amerindian context, agency depends not as much on a “reflexive capacity” as it does “its fabrication through ritual and shamanic practice”. More generally, the book calls for moving beyond the historiographic tradition in attempts to understand Amazonian ways of experiencing time.

Related references:

DESCOLA, Philippe (1992) – Societies of nature and the nature of society, in A. Kuper (ed.), *Conceptualizing society* (London, Routledge): 107-126.

DESCOLA, Philippe (1994) – *In the society of nature: A native ecology in Amazonia* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).

DESCOLA, Philippe (1996) – Constructing natures: Symbolic ecology and social practice, in P. Descola and G. Pálsson (eds.), *Nature and society: Anthropological perspectives* (London, Routledge): 82-102.

FAUSTO, Carlos (2000) – Of enemies and pets: Warfare and shamanism in Amazonia, *American Ethnologist*, 26 (4): 933-956.

- FAUSTO, Carlos (2001) – *Inimigos Fiéis: história, guerra e xamanismo na Amazônia* (São Paulo, Universidade de São Paulo).
- FAUSTO, Carlos (2007) – Feasting on people: Eating animals and humans in Amazonia, *Current Anthropology*, 48 (4): 497-530.
- GOW, Peter (2001) – *An Amazonian myth and its history* (Oxford, Oxford University Press).
- HILL, Jonathan and Jean-Pierre CHAUMEIL (eds.) (forthcoming) – *Burst of breath: Ritual flute music in Amazonia* (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press).
- LIMA, Tania S. (1999) – The two and its many: Reflections on perspectivism in Tupi cosmology, *Ethnos*, 64 (1): 107-131.
- LIMA, Tania S. (2005) – *Um Peixe Olhou Para Mim: O Povo Yudja e a Perspectiva* (São Paulo, Editora UNESP).
- LONDOÑO SULKIN, Carlos (2005) – Inhuman beings: Morality and perspectivism among Muinane people (Colombian Amazon), *Ethnos*, 70 (1): 7-30.
- OVERING, Joanna (1993) – Death and the loss of civilized predation among the Piaroa of the Amazon basin, *L'Homme*, 126-128: 191-211.
- RIVAL, Laura (2005) – The attachment of the soul to the body among the Huaorani of Amazonian Ecuador, *Ethnos*, 70 (3): 285-310.
- SANTOS-GRANERO, Fernando (2009) – *Vital enemies: Slavery, predation, and the Amerindian political economy of life* (Austin, University of Texas Press).
- SANTOS-GRANERO, Fernando (ed.) (2009) – *The occult life of things: Native Amazonian theories of materiality and personhood* (Tucson, University of Arizona Press).
- TAYLOR, Anne-Christine (1983) – The marriage alliance and its structural variations in Jivaroan societies, *Social Science Information*, 22 (3): 331-353.
- VILAÇA, Aparecida (1992) – *Comendo Como Gente: Formas do Canibalismo Wari'* (Rio de Janeiro, Editora UFRJ).
- VILAÇA, Aparecida (1993) – O canibalismo funerário Pakaa-Nova: Uma etnografia, in E. Viveiros de Castro and M. Carneiro da Cunha (eds.), *Amazonia: Etnologia e historia indigena* (São Paulo, FAPESP): 285-310.
- VILAÇA, Aparecida (2002) – Making kin out of others in Amazonia, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 8: 347-364.
- VIVEIROS DE CASTRO, Eduardo (1992) – *From the enemy's point of view: Humanity and divinity in an Amazonian society* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press).
- VIVEIROS DE CASTRO, Eduardo (1996) – Images of nature and society in Amazonian ethnology, *Annual Reviews of Anthropology*, 25: 179-200.
- VIVEIROS DE CASTRO, Eduardo (1998) – Cosmological deixis and Amerindian perspectivism, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 4 (3): 469-488.
- VIVEIROS DE CASTRO, Eduardo (2004) – Exchanging perspectives: The transformation of objects into subjects in Amerindian ontologies, *Common Knowledge*, 10 (3): 463-484.
- WHITEHEAD, Neil and Robin WRIGHT (2004) – Introduction: Dark Shamanism, in *Darkness and secrecy: The anthropology of assault sorcery and witchcraft in Amazonia* (Durham, Duke University Press): 1-19.

4) Recent adaptations of perspectivism beyond Amazonia

- 5 This section lists some key texts that illustrate the growing influence of perspectivism in studies of relations between humans and non-humans in other parts of the world. Ethnographic works on cosmology in Siberia, Inner Asia, Papua New Guinea and elsewhere suggest that indigenous understandings of personhood and the non-human world challenge fundamental Western assumptions about “nature”, “culture”, human agency, as well as the nature of anthropological research itself. Such an approach is

part of a proposed “ontological turn” which attempts to move away from traditional anthropological concerns with representation, knowledge and identity, and towards an anthropology derived from indigenous concepts.

HENARE, Amiria, Martin HOLBRAAD and Sari WASTELL (eds.) (2007) – *Thinking through things: Theorising artefacts ethnographically* (New York, Routledge).

This edited collection attempts to bring a new, critical perspective on how ethnography holds the potential for understanding the relationship between “concepts” and “things” in new ways. Claiming to build on the broader anthropological projects of Viveiros de Castro, Strathern and Wagner, the volume’s editors make a case for taking “things” encountered in fieldwork “as they present themselves” rather than as representations of something else. They challenge the tendency in anthropology to assume a separation between words and things, signifier and signified, reality and representation, thus arguing for an openness to the possibility that “things” have *su generis* meanings. The book’s central contention is that whereas anthropology traditionally views ethnography as a body of data that functions to test our own theories, we should instead attend to how “‘things’ themselves may dictate a plurality of ontologies”. More broadly, the authors advocate a move in anthropology away from questions of knowledge and epistemology and toward those of ontology. They suggest that this kind of “logical reversal” allows the ethnographic encounter to create truly novel concepts, rather than just revisiting those of our own making. Following the lead of Viveiros de Castro, the volume introduction argues that instead of viewing differences in terms of knowledge, beliefs or representations of “the world”, we should instead understand them as “different worlds” in and of themselves. In order to take differences seriously, we should thus abandon the assumption that “things” and “concepts” are separate entities, and instead follow the logic of “things” themselves as they emerge in the ethnographic encounter. The book has parallels with recent theorizations of agency in anthropology and material culture, in which scholars increasingly recognise ontological assumptions that attribute agency to objects and various other non-human entities.

Related references:

EMPSON, Rebecca, Caroline HUMPHREY and Morten Axel PEDERSEN (eds.) (2007) – *Inner Asia*, 9 (2) (Special issue on perspectivism).

HIGH, Casey (2008) – End of the spear: Re-imagining Amazonian anthropology and history through film, in L. Chua, C. High and T. Lau (eds.), *How do we know? Evidence, ethnography, and the making of anthropological knowledge* (Newcastle, Cambridge Scholars Publishing): 76-96.

HIGH, Casey (2009) – Victims and martyrs: Converging histories of violence in Amazonian anthropology and US cinema, *Anthropology and Humanism*, 34 (1): 41-50.

KIRSCH, Stuart (2006) – *Reverse anthropology: Indigenous analysis of social and environmental relations in New Guinea* (Stanford, Stanford University Press).

PEDERSEN, Morten Axel (2007) – Talismans of thought: Shamanist ontologies and extended cognition in Northern Mongolia, in A. Henare, M. Holbraad and S. Wastell (eds.), *Thinking through things: Theorising artefacts ethnographically* (New York, Routledge): 141-166.

SCOTT, Michael (2007) – *The severed snake: Matrilineages, making place, and a Melanesian Christianity in Southeast Salomon Islands* (Durham, Carolina Academic Press).

VIVEIROS DE CASTRO, Eduardo (2003) – *Anthropology and science*, 5th Decennial conference of the Association of social anthropologists of the UK and Commonwealth . (Manchester, University of Manchester) [Manchester papers in social anthropology, 7].

WILLERSLEV, Rane (2004) – Not animal not not-animal: Hunting, imitation and empathetic knowledge among the Siberian Yukaghirs’, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, NS 10: 629-652.

WILLERSLEV, Rane (2007) – *Soul hunters: Hunting, animism, and personhood among the Siberian Yukaghirs* (Berkeley, University of California Press).

5) Agency in linguistics, sociolinguistics and ethnosyntax

- 6 One of the problems in attempting to create productive discussions about agency between anthropology and linguistics stems from the different understandings of agency (in anthropology) and agentivity (in linguistics). Whereas anthropological discussions often implicitly rely on a notion of agency as an individual or collective capacity for action in terms of self-consciousness and resistance to power structures (particularly in subaltern studies and early feminist anthropologies), linguists tend to understand agentivity in terms of an agent/patient construction in language based on a subject/object relation. While ethnography provides new ways of construing human and non-human agency, studies of linguistic features such as ergativity have inspired linguists to consider closely the ways in which ‘culture’ is encoded in grammar. Recent work in ethnosyntax thus holds considerable potential for bridging anthropological and linguistic understanding of agency.

DURANTI, Alessandro (2004) – Agency in language, in A. Duranti (ed.), *A companion to linguistic anthropology* (New York, Blackwell): 451-473.

Duranti addresses the general lack of precision and clarity with which concepts of agency have been communicated across disciplines. In contrast to the focus on agency in terms of individual social actors in the post-structuralist approaches of Bourdieu, Giddens and other social theorists, linguists adopt a semiotic notion of agency that tends to ignore the social implications of language. Duranti instead proposes a definition of agency that recognises 1) the degree of control an entity has over its own behaviour, 2) actions that affect other entities, and 3) entities whose actions are the object of evaluation. The two dimensions of agency, “performance” and “coding”, are mutually constitutive insofar as the enacting of agency (performance) simultaneously relies on and affects its encoding. Duranti also distinguishes between “ego-affirming” and “act-constituting” agency. Language itself constitutes ego-affirming agency since it affirms the existential self, a basic human faculty. The notion of act-constituting agency is derived from speech-act theory, in which speech-acts always entail a degree of “accountability” on the part of the speaker. In discussing the encoding of agency in language, Duranti points to both the universality and diversity in how languages represent agency and its mitigation. A key example of how languages are classified based on how they encode agency can be seen in the distinction between nominative-accusative and ergative-absolutive languages. Part of the diverse roles agency plays in language thus depends on the types of grammatical forms available within a specific language. Duranti’s broader goal is to promote a concept of agency that accounts for these aspects of ethnosyntax and questions of intentionality and affect that speak to the wider concerns of social theory.

KOCKELMAN, Paul (2007) – Agency: The relation between meaning, power, and knowledge, *Current Anthropology*, 48 (3): 375-401.

Like Duranti, Kockelman looks to theorise the multiple dimensions of agency as both a social and semiotic faculty that cuts across the terrain conventionally covered by multiple disciplines. He approaches agency through a highly complex vocabulary drawn from a Peircean theory of meaning in order to recognise how agency can be seen as highly graduated and distributed well beyond specific people, places and times. In contrast to many writings in linguistics, Kockelman incorporates a notion of “residential agency” that involves power over social,

semiotic, and material processes, whereas “representational agency” is associated with having knowledge about these processes. Such a semiotic approach distinguishes between signs, objects and “interpretants” (whatever a sign creates). What is at stake in semiotic processes is not just a sign standing for an object, but instead ‘correspondences’ between two relations (a “relation between relations”). The article follows Peirce in adopting a highly varied typology of different kinds of interpretants that account for embodied responses, emotions and relatively abstract processes. Based on this sign-object-interpretant model, Kockelman distinguishes between multiple kinds of agency, including “control”, “composition” and “commitment”. One of the central points suggested by this approach is that “the locus of agency may often rest not in the individuals, but rather in their ongoing interactions and the institutions that enable these”. Like Duranti, Kockelman recognises “accountability” as a central aspect of agency, but goes further in addressing questions of power familiar to social theory.

CARTER, Bob and Alison SEALEY (2000) – Language, structure and agency: What can realist social theory offer to sociolinguistics?, *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 4 (1): 3-20.

This article deals with how sociolinguistic research might benefit from further critical engagement with the structure/agency debate in the social sciences. The authors follow the work of Margaret Archer and Derek Layder in arguing for a “sociological realism” that insists on the analytical separation of structure and agency. In an apparently conventional poststructuralist vein, such a “realist” social theory is claimed to retain a view of the world in which “it is human beings who do things”. In relating this approach to sociolinguistics, they warn against “reducing language to the sum of individual utterances” or “endowing it with the ability to construct social reality”. Carter and Sealey conclude by outlining some methodological implications of their approach which, apart from identifying specific “social domains” of language, appear to be consistent with conventional ethnographic methods in the social sciences.

ENFIELD, Nick J. (ed.) (2002) – *Ethnosyntax: explorations in grammar and culture* (Oxford, Oxford University Press).

The contributors to this collection explore how cultural ideas, values and social structures are encoded in the semantics of grammar in diverse cultural contexts. That is, they re-open ongoing debates about linguistic relativity in suggesting that complex morphosyntactic systems may reveal certain aspects of the “society” or “culture” in which particular speakers participate. Of course, one of the central problems for identifying the interconnections between grammar and culture is the age-old question of how precisely to define “culture” itself—especially since many scholars have debated the relevance of such a concept altogether. But the range of examples provided in the book make clear enough the value of ethnosyntax as a key approach that combines the insights of linguistics and anthropology. The book editors specify how ethnosyntax can be understood in both “narrow” and “broad” senses. The “narrow” sense refers to how distinct “philosophies” are encoded in the semantics of morphosyntax in a given language. The “broader” sense of ethnosyntax refers to linguistic constructions in which, although a given morphosyntactic device may not be culturally specific, it does demonstrate culturally specific patterns of use and effects. One of the central contributions of the volume as a whole is to re-open many of the questions previously approached in linguistic relativity debates. Rather than suggesting that language simply determines or limits thought or “culture”, the book engages seriously with the question of how grammar and culture are “inter-constitutive”. Such an approach suggests a potentially highly productive link between studies of ethnosyntax and cosmology, as illustrated by the individual contributions to the volume as well as a number of key recent texts in linguistic anthropology. Such an approach requires viewing grammatical constructions as meaningful.

Related references:

- BENVENISTE, Émile (1971) – Categories of thought and categories of language, in *Problems in general linguistics*, Mary Meek, trans. (Miami, University of Miami Press).
- CAMARGO, Eliane (forthcoming) – *Animate/Inanimate in Cashinahua (Huni Kuin) Grammar and Sociability*.
- DIXON, Robert (1979) – Ergativity, *Language*, 55: 59-138.
- EVERETT, Daniel (2005) – Cultural constraints on grammar and cognition in Pirahã, *Current Anthropology*, 46 (4): 621-646.
- GUMPERZ, John J. and Stephen C. LEVINSON (eds.) (1996) – *Rethinking linguistic relativity* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).
- HANKS, William F. (1990) – *Referential practice: Language and lived space among the Maya* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press).
- HILL, Jane and Bruce MANNHEIM (1992) – Language and world view, *Annual Reviews of Anthropology*, 21: 381-406.
- KOCKELMAN, Paul (2006) – Agent, person, subject, self, *Semiotica*, 162 (1-4): 1-18.
- LANGACKER, Ronald (1990) – *Concept, image, and symbol: The cognitive basis of grammar* (Berlin, Mouton de Gruyter).
- LUCY, John A. (1992) – *Language diversity and cognitive development: A reformulation of the linguistic relativity hypothesis* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).
- PLANCK, Frans (ed.) (1979) – *Ergativity: Towards a theory of grammatical relations* (London, Academic Press).
- RUMSEY, Alan (2003) – Language, desire, and the ontogenesis of intersubjectivity, *Language and Communication*, 23: 169-187.
- RUMSEY, Alan (1994) – The dreaming, human agency and inscriptive practice, *Oceania*, 65: 116-130.
- SILVERSTEIN, Michael (2000) – Whorfianism and the linguistic imagination of nationality, in P. V. Kroskrity (ed.), *Regimes of language: Ideologies, politics, and identities* (Santa Fe, School of American Research Press): 85-138.
- WIERZBICKA, Anna (1979) – Ethno-syntax and the philosophy of grammar, *Studies in Language*, 3 (3): 313-383.
- WIERZBICKA, Anna (1998) – *Emotions across languages and cultures: Diversity and universals* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).

AUTEUR

CASEY HIGH

Lecturer, Department of Anthropology, Goldsmiths, University of London