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## 8 Embodied sociolinguistics

Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall

### Introduction: *Habes corpus!*

Bodies and embodiment are central to the production, perception, and social interpretation of language.<sup>1</sup> In spoken languages, the body is the locus of the speaking voice and the listening ear, while in the case of sign languages the body supplies the grammar for the entire linguistic system (cf. Lucas and Bayley, this volume, Chapter 16), a fact that has important consequences for theorizing language in general as an embodied phenomenon. Embodiment is also enlisted in a variety of semiotic practices that endow linguistic communication with meaning, from the indexicalities of bodily adornment to gesture, gaze, and other forms of movement. And just as bodies produce language, so the converse also holds: Language produces bodies. That is, language is a primary means by which the body enters the sociocultural realm as a site of semiosis, through cultural discourses about bodies as well as linguistic practices of bodily regulation and management. Moreover, even as technologically mediated forms of communication may seem to displace physical bodies as sources of linguistic production, the body insistently reasserts itself in communicative practices in the spheres of technology and the media.

Despite the crucial role of embodiment in producing social meaning through language and vice versa, a broad-based discussion within sociocultural linguistics concerning the theoretical relationship between language and embodiment is largely lacking. Hence what we engage here is not a current debate but a needed interdisciplinary conversation that includes sociocultural linguists of all stripes (see Coupland and Gwyn 2003, *inter alia*, for one valuable starting point for this dialogue).

In part this lack of dialogue among research traditions can be attributed to methodological and analytic differences, which often prevent scholars

<sup>1</sup> Our thanks to Nik Coupland for providing us the opportunity to explore these ideas in this volume and for his valuable comments on earlier drafts of this chapter. Thanks are also due to Brenda Farnell and Joshua Raclaw for offering useful feedback and reference suggestions. Our failure to heed these readers' sound advice on a few key points should not be construed as their fault in any way.

investigating embodiment in one domain from drawing on work in other areas. But it is also due to a tendency in much sociolinguistic research to conceptualize the body as secondary to language rather than as the *sine qua non* of language. Perhaps this is unsurprising given that the discipline of linguistics as conventionally practiced is logocentric almost by definition. Within generative linguistics in particular, most embodied phenomena have been ignored or viewed as background noise or “performance” rather than as part of the abstract grammatical system of “competence” imagined to be the proper subject of linguistic scholarship. Empirical work in embodied cognitive science departs from this view by arguing that linguistic knowledge is grounded in the body’s perceptual and motor systems (e.g., McNeill 1985; 1992; Bergen et al. 2003; Bergen 2007), yet dominant theoretical perspectives continue to characterize language production and comprehension as based in mental representations involving the manipulation of abstract symbols. Professional language ideologies notwithstanding, embodiment is quite literally how language works. Hence the subtitle of this section revises the familiar legal phrase to remind readers of a fundamental truth: ‘You have a body!’

In this chapter, we call for an embodied sociolinguistics – or, more precisely, an embodied sociocultural linguistics (Bucholtz and Hall 2008).<sup>2</sup> Drawing on scholarship from a variety of approaches that contribute to this interdisciplinary field, we discuss work on embodiment that centers on several important analytic areas: the voice; the bodily semiotics of style and self-presentation; discourses and counterdiscourses of the body; embodied motion, action, and experience; and the mediation of embodiment by material objects and technologies. Although we focus primarily on embodiment, the body participates in a wide array of material contexts and processes, and so we do not sharply distinguish embodiment from other aspects of materiality (Shankar and Cavanaugh 2012; Cavanaugh and Shankar forthcoming). The primary goal of our discussion is to bring different perspectives into dialogue with one another. A second goal is to suggest the sorts of analytic issues that an embodied sociocultural linguistics can address – topics that may be viewed as marginal to or entirely outside some branches of sociocultural linguistics yet are crucial to the advancement of the field as a whole. A final goal is to explore the theoretical consequences of placing embodiment at the center of sociolinguistic inquiry. In the five realms we examine, we consider in particular how a

<sup>2</sup> In this chapter, as in our other work, *sociocultural linguistics* is a cover term for the broad interdisciplinary study of language, culture, and society, similar to the inclusive spirit in which the term *sociolinguistics* is intended in this volume. Although most of the scholars we discuss in this chapter do not use the label *sociocultural linguistics* for what they study, we find the term useful for highlighting the social and cultural dimensions of such scholarship. The adjective *sociolinguistic* is used without disciplinary or subdisciplinary implications to describe any phenomenon or activity involving language, culture, and society.

focus on bodies broadens sociocultural linguists’ understanding of the key concepts of indexicality, discourse, and agency. Recognizing that these and other core concepts are both material and linguistic is crucial to the ongoing development of sociocultural linguistics as a fully embodied field of inquiry.

Indeed, in some ways sociocultural linguistics is ideally positioned to quite literally incorporate the body into the study of language, given many researchers’ theoretical predisposition to see these two domains as integrated rather than antithetical. By contrast, the scholarly perception of a fundamental division between discourse and materiality has long driven debate in other fields. However, a number of theorists have challenged this dichotomy, most influentially – and controversially – Judith Butler (1990; 1993), via her insight that the gendered body is the product of discourse rather than biology.<sup>3</sup> This and related ideas have helped spark sociolinguistic research on the politics of embodiment and especially of bodily difference on the basis of gender assignment or identity, sexual identities and practices, racial categorization, and ideologies of health, ability, and physical normativity or acceptability. Through such work, sociocultural linguists from various traditions have already advanced the linguistic understanding of embodied processes and phenomena. Before we turn to research that illustrates the simultaneously embodied and linguistic processes of indexicality, discourse, and agency, however, we first consider early work in the field that introduced an integrated perspective on language and the body.

### Finding the body in sociocultural linguistics

The body has been of enduring interest to researchers of language, culture, and society, as attested by a range of early agenda-setting interdisciplinary volumes that included at least some attention to embodiment (e.g., Hymes 1962; Gumperz and Hymes 1964; Giglioli 1972; Pride and Holmes 1972; Bauman and Sherzer 1974). The 1950s saw the emergence of areas of inquiry sometimes known as *kinesics*, *proxemics*, and *paralanguage*, which drew on ideas from structural linguistics, anthropology, and other fields to investigate the cultural workings of gesture, gaze, and the arrangement of bodies in space, usually based on the meticulous analysis of film recordings of face-to-face interaction (e.g., Hall 1959; Birdwhistell 1970; Key 1975; Kendon 1990). Alongside such research, the work of Erving Goffman offered wide-ranging analyses of embodied phenomena derived primarily from sociological field observations,

<sup>3</sup> As noted below, a number of material feminists have critiqued Butler for what they view as her privileging of discourse and erasure of the material realities of embodiment; in our reading, however, Butler’s theories recognize the importance of the body without reducing it to a pre-cultural prime.

including such issues as the role of embodiment in the social management of the self (1967; 1971), bodily and behavioral stigma (1963), and the visual representation of the gendered body (1979).

Ethnomethodology, as a related line of research within sociology, has also addressed embodiment as part of its focus on social norms as interactional accomplishments. This issue was explored most famously through the case study of a young trans woman, Agnes, who presented herself to clinicians as intersex in order to receive gender-corrective surgery (Garfinkel 1967); this study inspired later feminist-informed ethnomethodological work on the accomplishment of gender that arguably anticipated and provided an empirical grounding for Butler's perspective (West and Zimmerman 1987).

Developing from ethnomethodology, conversation analysis focuses on interactional norms at an even finer level of detail, but aside from a few pioneering scholars who habitually used film and/or video data and incorporated embodiment into their earliest analyses and continue to do so (e.g., Goodwin 1981; Heath 1986), most early work stemming from conversation analysis drew on audio recordings or analyzed film recordings without close attention to embodied action. A great deal of data was taken from telephone conversations, which were seen as obviating the need to consider bodily phenomena in any detail. However, in more recent years, conversation analysts have been at the forefront in investigating the use of the body in interaction. In addition, a second strand of early embodied research in conversation analysis focused on prosody (French and Local 1986; Local and Kelly 1986), a line of investigation that has continued in later scholarship (e.g., Couper-Kuhlen and Selting 2006).

Meanwhile, within anthropology the ethnography of communication and interactional sociolinguistics also attend to the relationship between language and embodiment, informing contemporary research on the body in linguistic anthropology. The ethnography of communication takes as its starting point the question of what counts as communicative in particular cultural contexts (Gumperz and Hymes 1964; Bauman and Sherzer 1974; Hymes 1974), including not only speech but also embodied and material phenomena ranging from drumming to movements of the body to claps of thunder. Interactional sociolinguistics, which in some ways built on the 1950s work on face-to-face interaction but typically offers greater ethnographic and linguistic nuance, examines how fine-grained aspects of talk, including intonation as an embodied aspect of linguistic structure, may be used to perform culturally specific interactional functions (Gumperz 1982).

Another strand of scholarship, rooted in M. A. K. Halliday's theory of social semiotics (e.g., Halliday 1978; Hodge and Kress 1988), has long given sustained attention to material and embodied phenomena through the lenses of critical linguistics and critical discourse analysis (Kress and Hodge 1979;

Fairclough 1989), multimodality and visual communication (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996; 2001), and mediated discourse analysis (Scollon 2001). This broad research tradition focuses more closely on textual and mediated materialities than the frameworks discussed above; consequently, embodiment itself has been less central to these perspectives than the semiotic representation of materiality generally (but see Norris 2004; Norris and Jones 2005).

By contrast with these early sociolinguistic engagements with bodily and material phenomena, for many years the study of language within variationist sociolinguistics was for the most part a disembodied undertaking. This situation can be understood as the result of both methodological constraints and theoretical orientation. By the 1960s variationist sociolinguistics was becoming an increasingly technology-dependent field, using relatively inexpensive and portable audio recording equipment (at the time, reel-to-reel recorders; later, analog cassette recorders and eventually digital formats) to elicit vernacular language in situ in speakers' neighborhoods and homes. Examination of embodied linguistic practices would have been impeded by the greater bulkiness and cost of film recording technology, particularly given the quantity of data typically required for variationist analysis compared with early interactional microanalyses. In addition, the prospect of filming may have raised concerns about participant self-consciousness and the resulting effect on the data in an era when even audio recording was still a novelty (cf. Labov 1972).

The central obstacle to examining language as an embodied phenomenon within early variationist sociolinguistics, however, was theoretical, not methodological. To begin with, a focus on language as traditionally conceived was necessary to gain legitimacy as a still young and marginalized field within the discipline. Moreover, early analyses gave priority to phonological variation at the segmental level, with secondary attention to morphological and syntactic variation; hence less well-understood embodied linguistic phenomena, such as intonation, were largely set aside (for an important exception see Guy and Vonwiller 1984; Guy et al. 1986). But most significantly, early variationist sociolinguistics viewed its primary task as the investigation of variation as language change in progress; hence, many of the most influential researchers in the field concerned themselves with ongoing changes in linguistic patterning rather than with the place of language in a broad communicative field encompassing the full range of embodied practices. However, more recent developments in what are sometimes termed *second-wave* and *third-wave sociolinguistics* (cf. Eckert, this volume, Chapter 3; Bell, this volume, Chapter 18) have introduced the body into variationist sociolinguistics as part of a larger reframing of the field around social semiosis (Eckert 2012). We next examine how this new line of work, along with contemporary research in linguistic anthropology and other

areas, offers theoretical purchase for an embodied sociocultural linguistics via its focus on the semiotic process of indexicality.

### Embodied indexicality

The notion of indexicality, or the production of contextualized meaning, arises from bodily engagement with the world. In his various formulations of the three basic sign relations, Charles Sanders Peirce consistently characterizes indexicality as a fundamentally material relation that includes “all natural signs and physical symptoms”; he offers “a pointing finger” as the exemplar of the index (1885: 181). Sociocultural linguists have extended Peirce’s original idea of indexicality to encompass the ideologically saturated semiotic processes that produce social meaning, giving rise to a long tradition of research on language ideologies (Silverstein 1979; Woolard and Schieffelin 1994; see also Part I of this book, Chapters 2–5).

However, as scholars recognize, language ideologies go beyond indexicality, readily enlisting an iconic dimension that links social categories to a bodily hexis that is imagined to be the source of socially marked linguistic forms or practices; iconicity thus positions language as a symptom of bodily disposition (Irvine and Gal 2000; Silverstein 2003; 2005; Eckert 2008; Woolard 2008). In other words, sociocultural beliefs about language rely on indexical iconization (Carr 2011; cf. Silverstein 2003; 2005), an ideological process that rationalizes and naturalizes semiotic practice as inherent essence, often by anchoring it within the body. Indeed, the body may be physically deployed in the service of furthering language ideology, such as when speakers perform stereotyped “gay speech” through the flap of a limp wrist or parody “teenage girl talk” with the accompanying embodied posture of taking a selfie with a cellphone. The iconic dimension of indexicality is therefore a central issue for an embodied sociocultural linguistics, as shown especially in studies of the voice as well as research on style.

#### *The voice*

The voice is the embodied heart of spoken language: It emerges from the body, and through indexicality it auditorily locates the body in social space as being of a particular kind.<sup>4</sup> Recent sociophonetically informed scholarship on the

<sup>4</sup> By *voice* we refer to the production of speech via phonation and related physical processes. We do not intend the problematic liberationist metaphor of voice as empowerment (cf. Bucholtz, Casillas, and Lee forthcoming) nor the Bakhtinian metaphor of voice as a socially distinctive style that can be interwoven with other styles (e.g., Bakhtin 1981), although voice and style are often connected, as discussed below.

voice examines how such phenomena as phonation type, pitch, and the articulatory production of phonemes are employed by speakers as well as interpreted by listeners, especially in relation to categories of gender, sexuality, and race. While most research on the gendered and sexualized indexicalities of the voice in particular has been experimental in nature (Munson and Babel 2007), the social meaning of the voice cannot be ascertained without consideration of the local cultural context within which it is used and heard (Weidman 2014). Ethnographically based studies of the semiotics of the voice (Podesva 2007; Mendoza-Denton 2011; Zimman 2013; Harkness 2014) demonstrate that it does not directly index race, gender, or sexuality; rather, voice phenomena, like all linguistic acts, in the first instance perform specific cultural and interactional functions (Nielsen 2010; Sicoli 2010; Podesva 2013), yet in so doing they also come to be ideologically associated with specific social categories (cf. Ochs 1992).

Such research clearly illustrates the role of indexical iconization in the relationship between language and embodiment. For example, Robert Podesva’s (2013) study of gender, race, and phonation type argues against the sociobiological claim put forth by John Ohala (1994) that high pitch is iconic of smallness, femaleness, and nondominance, an association that Ohala asserts is innate across species. Podesva’s finding that African American women, more than African American men or European American women, use falsetto to take negative evaluative stances reveals instead a far more complex indexical field (Eckert 2008), in which falsetto, as an extreme form of phonation, becomes iconically linked to particular kinds of powerful stances. More generally, because the voice is grounded in the body, it can be ideologically linked to particular ways of using the body (e.g., to display power) or to particular types of people who are believed to use their bodies and voices in those ways (e.g., African American women). But because the association of the voice with social qualities is fundamentally indexical and gains an iconic overlay only through ideological processes, any such association is a historically contingent sociopolitical construct, not an innate biological fact.

#### *Style and embodied self-presentation*

Much of the recent sociophonetic work on the indexical iconization of the voice emerges from the retheorizing of sociolinguistic style as a set of practices for displaying social stances and personae in local sociocultural contexts (e.g., Rampton 1995; Eckert 2003; Coupland 2007).<sup>5</sup> This shift placed embodiment squarely on the research agenda of sociocultural linguists concerned with

<sup>5</sup> The notion of stance is of course itself also a partly embodied concept, as explored in some recent sociolinguistic research on this topic (e.g., Jaffe 2009).

language variation. From this perspective, the stylistic meaning of a linguistic variant cannot be determined in isolation; instead, stylistic analysis requires examination of the place of specific semiotic forms within a wider system of social meaning. This may involve attention to sociolinguistic variation at multiple levels: segmental phonology, grammar, prosody, and the lexicon (e.g., Mendoza-Denton 2008).

More radically, from the standpoint of semiosis there is no conceptual difference between stylistic variables based in language and those based in (other forms of) embodiment. As Eckert (1989; 2000) demonstrates in her study of U.S. high school students, which is deeply influenced by Dick Hebdige's (1979) visual study of youth styles, style is produced not only through speakers' use of a locally innovative versus conservative vowel or a standard versus nonstandard grammatical form but also through the color and cut of their clothing, their usual lunch hangout – even their preferred controlled substance. Likewise, Latino teenage boys in Chicago index their ethnonational identities as either Mexican or Puerto Rican through finely observed differentiation of their hairstyles (Rosa forthcoming), while young Tamil men in urban South India adorn themselves with counterfeit brands and cheap brand-inspired clothing to establish a peer-oriented aesthetics that downplays class and caste hierarchy (Nakassis forthcoming). In styles, linguistic and embodied practices align to produce a culturally meaningful whole (even if the assemblage of features exploits semiotic dissonances between established stylistic meanings). Thus the semiotics of style includes all dimensions of language as well as material and embodied resources of self-presentation, which together yield ideologically cohesive semiotic packages available for interpretation by others (see also Bucholtz 2015).

Here again, indexical iconization is at work, for it is embodied variables that give semiotic meaning to linguistic variables rather than the reverse. That is, to make semiotic sense of themselves and others, social actors link specific embodied ways of being in the world to ideological expectations regarding specific ways of speaking. To use the categories at the heart of Eckert's high school study, a bubbly, clean-cut jock girl who favors pastels should not talk like a tough, black-clad, chain-smoking burnout. By the same token, a non-standard form like multiple negation, which linguistically iconizes the nonconformity of the burnout style, cannot be indexical of jock identity without a reconfiguration of the entire semiotic system. Although such iconicity is always ideological, it may have a physical basis: In later work, Eckert (2010) argues that early adolescent girls may exploit sound symbolism within the vowel system to make themselves variously sound small and childlike or more grownup and knowledgeable about teen activities. Given the acoustic properties of these vowels, it is unlikely (but not impossible) that they could be assigned the contrasting indexicality.

This and other research on style and the bodily presentation of self is often ethnographic in its approach, for it is only through a deep understanding of local semiotics that the sociocultural meaning of embodiment can be recognized. Such scholarship demonstrates that although the social meaning of bodily practices is contingent on situated cultural and historical factors, via ideology this contingency is erased and meaning is instead viewed as inherent and fixed in the body. This process of ideologization depends on the establishment and circulation of hegemonic discourses of embodiment. We turn now to a consideration of how discourses of the body categorize and evaluate bodily difference, as well as how these discourses may be countered through the agentive discursive work of embodied social actors.

### Embodied discourse

The idea that the body is discursive as well as material is pivotal to much of the recent sociolinguistic scholarship on embodiment, especially within the field of language, gender, and sexuality. The poststructural theorizing of the body as a discursive construction is most closely associated with Butler's (1990; 1993) critique of feminism's traditional distinction between biological sex and social gender (see also Zimman and Hall 2009). For Butler, the sexed body, though imagined to be a biological truth, is meaningful only because discourse makes it so. Her work draws heavily from Michel Foucault's (1970; 1978) genealogical critique of the classification schemes of science not as objective fact, but rather as constituted through disciplinary histories of discourse (cf. Rampton, this volume, Chapter 14). As Foucault shows, whether a homosexual act is construed as sin or sickness – or, more recently, as part of the normal range of human sexuality – depends on the prevailing discourses in a given era. Similarly, Butler argues, bodies become intelligible as female or male by entering discursive systems that recognize them as such.

Although some critics charge that Butler and similar theorists reduce intractable material realities to "mere words," the recognition of the intimate connection between discourse and materiality in fact advances scholarly understanding of both concepts by foregrounding the very real material consequences of discursive regimes. This general perspective informs a wide range of sociolinguistic scholarship focused not only on gender and sexuality but also on such embodied categories as race, health, and disability. Bringing together linguistic analysis of the details of discursive structure and Foucauldian notions of discourses as systems of productive power and knowledge, a wealth of linguistic scholarship on the categorization, evaluation, and regulation of varied body morphologies demonstrates the central role of discourse in maintaining and challenging the borders of ideologically recognized and valued kinds of bodies.

*Discourses of the body*

One of the clearest examples of the discursive dimension of embodiment is the lexicon of gendered body parts investigated by researchers of language, gender, and sexuality. Work in this vein focuses on how speakers bring meaning to the body by conspiring with dominant discourses on gender – for example, men who access metaphors of violence and conquest when coining terms for the penis (Cameron 1992) or students who use patterns of slang that perpetuate homophobia and misogyny (Sutton 1995; Armstrong 1997; Thurlow 2001). Such research establishes how normative discourses of gender inform dichotomous understandings of female and male embodiment as well as the sexual acts that gendered bodies are expected or permitted to perform. In an echo of Foucault, Virginia Braun and Celia Kitzinger's (2001) study of dictionary definitions of women's and men's genitals reveals that even scientific genres such as medical dictionaries rely on such ideological dichotomies. Whereas female genitals are described by these texts in terms of their location in the body, male genitals are described in terms of function, reinforcing popular understandings of men's sexuality as more active than women's. Such binary representations are slow to change, sedimented through discursive iteration and perpetuated across discourse genres. For this reason, the quantitative methods of corpus linguistics are particularly suited to investigating the repetitive reach of these constructions (Baker 2008; Motschenbacher 2009).

Sociolinguistic research on the medicalized body likewise offers empirical evidence in support of Foucault's claim that biomedical categorizations are created in discourse. Charles Briggs (2011) has coined the term *biocommunicability* to highlight the ways that illness is transformed when medical discourses leave the laboratory and travel into the media domains of public health and journalism. His work illustrates that even "virtual epidemics" such as the West Nile virus in San Diego or, more recently, the Ebola virus in Houston can be made "real" through the discourses of mediatization. The embodied effects of mediatization can also be seen in multimodal analyses that show how photographs of the human body become semiotic resources in mediatized discourses that range from tourism advertising (Caldas-Coulthard 2008) and war journalism (Chouliaraki 2007) to representations of sexual citizenship (Milani 2015). Other potential discursive transformations of the body arise when medical information moves – or fails to move – across cultural and linguistic borders. Scientific discourses on HIV/AIDS, for example, do not enter easily into cultural contexts in which talk about sex is taboo (Pigg 2001; Brookes 2011; Black 2013). In such cases, the body is shaped and reshaped by the linguistic systems available and the language ideologies that inform them.

*From discourse to counterdiscourse in body talk*

Although a focus on hegemonic discourse reveals how the body is regimented, language users do much more than unthinkingly repeat discursive hand-me-downs. The body is far from stable, shifting across time and space as speakers collaboratively construct new investments in the semiotics of physicality. For example, discourses of aging as loss of beauty may be both circulated and challenged in talk among older professional dancers (Coupland 2013). Further, researchers have documented how discourses of the body change across generations, as seen in studies of talk about body size (Wetherell 1996; Guendouzi 2004) and of new bodily discourses emergent within the contextualized identity concerns of social groups. The trans men discussed by Lal Zimman (2014), for example, disrupt normative ideologies of the body when they describe their surgically unaltered genitals as "transcocks," "boycunts," and "bonus holes." By remapping the expected links between sex and gender, these men authenticate themselves as masculine even if their embodiment is not normatively male. In contrast, India's hijras, a group historically recognized as a "third" biological sex, publicly reproduce the popular myth that they are asexuals "born without genitals" in order to prevent further marginalization, even as they engage privately in sexual acts with men (Hall 2005). As in queer theory, much of this research involves persons whose bodies do not easily materialize within female/male binaries of social gender (see also Hall 2009; King 2015).

The above examples indicate that any analysis of the categorizing power of bodily discourses must consider the audience's role in shaping discursive production. As shown in the many embodied categories commonly discussed in sociocultural linguistics – race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, age – as well as categories that are now gaining attention, such as ability, the body is a dialogic product, co-constructed in the back and forth of speakers and hearers. Susan Speer and Richard Green's (2007) conversation analysis of an interaction between a trans woman seeking sexual reassignment surgery and her evaluating psychologist – a study that explicitly recalls Garfinkel's classic work with Agnes – brings this issue into sharp focus. In this pressure-laden institutional setting, the patient's multimodal presentation of her appearance – or more poignantly, her attempt to display a "passing" femininity – is contingent on the type of participation enacted by the psychologist. Likewise, H. Samy Alim's (forthcoming) discussion of his own experiences of transracialization demonstrates how racial classification is read through situational logics of language, culture, and sociopolitical relations. The regulatory power of bodily discourses can also be seen in teenagers' collaborative and audience-oriented evaluative talk about the body size of others, as well as the responses by the targets of such teasing (Taylor 2011). Such studies of the jointly

constructed and emergent nature of bodily categorizations indicate that an exclusive focus on culturally dominant discourses of the body misses the crucial role of agency in producing and circulating counterdiscourses of embodiment.

### Embodied agency

As the preceding discussion suggests, discursive agency is not merely a matter of language. The relationship between the body and discourse is more productively viewed as bidirectional or even recursive (Edelman and Zimman 2014). That is, as a material entity that is both enabled and constrained by physical possibility, the body offers certain affordances that shape the trajectory of semiosis, even if a particular outcome cannot be predicted in advance. Thus, agency is produced through a network of entities – or interactants (Latour 2005) – that are both semiotic and material. A new line of scholarship from interactional analysis and embodied cognitive science even argues that the body has its own agency separate from the speaker, based on accumulated tactile and haptic experiences and skills (Streeck 2013). This focus on embodied motion and experience expands sociolinguistic theory to recognize and accommodate the distribution of agency beyond language to include human bodies as well as nonhuman entities, such as animals, other living beings, material objects, and the physical world.

### *Embodied motion*

Perhaps the most basic mechanism of embodied agency is the process through which fleeting embodied phenomena such as eye gaze and gesture as well as more sustained movements of the body work with and without talk to perform particular social actions (e.g., Streeck et al. 2011; Haddington et al. 2013). By examining the moment-to-moment sequential progression and social coordination of embodied motion, interactional researchers are able to show in fine detail how minute movements such as the flash of an eyebrow, the twist of a torso, or the lifting of a finger are consequential for ongoing talk and other activities. A different perspective on embodied motion is offered by the anthropology of human movement (e.g., Farnell 1999; 2012), which combines detailed analysis with theoretical insights from cultural and linguistic anthropology. Both traditions of research convincingly demonstrate that the body is not simply a supplement to language but a basic element of communication.

Embodied motion has been theorized as the primordial source of indexicality, given Peirce's assertion that the most basic indexical form is the pointing gesture. Linguistic-anthropological research on culture- and setting-specific deictic processes conceptualizes spatial deixis as a situated

interactional practice rather than as a linguistic system of context-dependent reference (Hanks 1990; Haviland 1993; Enfield 2002; 2009). This line of scholarship positions the body as the origo of indexicality, the deictic center, around which social relationships and cultural space are brought into interactional play through the coordination of speech and gesture. Iconicity is also an important semiotic phenomenon in interactional research on embodiment, due to the prevalence of gestures that physically resemble their referents in some way (e.g., Kendon 2004).

The habituality and apparent lack of deliberation involved in such mundane embodied actions as pointing may seem to preclude viewing them as evidence of agency. However, ethnographic researchers argue against this perspective. Frequently targeted in such critiques is Pierre Bourdieu's (1978) concept of habitus, or the set of socialized and socially distinguishing dispositions that shape the use of the body. Although this concept has been productively applied in sociocultural linguistics, Bourdieu's work is viewed by many scholars as too deterministic in its representation of bodily practice as largely beyond the reach of human awareness – indeed, it has been argued that habitus is best analyzed as an agentive process of habituation (Mahmood 2005). Habitus is far more than an unconscious logic, for physical acts as mundane as crossing the street or jumping on a moving bus can be brought into systems of signification (Farnell 2000; Elyachar 2011). The process whereby embodied habit becomes socially meaningful is illuminated by a variety of contextualized studies showing that even routinized bodily actions may operate in highly agentive ways to inscribe the ideological boundaries of social difference (e.g., Goodwin and Alim 2010; Hoenes del Pinal 2011; Arnold 2013).

### *Embodied experience*

Building on research on discourses of embodiment as well as studies of embodied movement, one of the most important developments in sociolinguistic scholarship on the body is the growing attention to bodily experience. This work has been especially driven by researchers of illness, disability, and impairment who argue for experiential agency as a crucial counterpoint to the prevailing discourses of disability. Under these discourses, persons with ailments or nonnormative bodies or bodily experiences are constructed as outliers to physical normalcy, and this construction in turn affects the perceived and sometimes even actual physical capacity of such persons to act (McPherron and Ramanathan 2010; Ramanathan 2010). In Elinor Ochs and Olga Solomon's (2005) view, practice-based paradigms enable an alternative discourse of ability by recognizing the place of both structure (dispositions) and agency (practices) in the production of subjectivity. If sense is "culturally organized competence in meaning making" (Solomon 2010: 243), then



persons with alternative configurations of sense have different, not deficient, competences (see also Keating and Hadder 2010). This perspective motivates a new strand of research that explores how persons with nonnormative bodily experiences of the world, as active participants in communities and social groups, navigate normative expectations of competence in everyday practice. For example, how does a Seattle Deaf woman in the process of losing her sight transition from a primarily visual to a primarily tactile mode of communication (Edwards 2012)? How does a quadriplegic man in Islamic Oman make use of digital media to manage interpersonal and social isolation (Al Zidjaly 2015)? How do child cancer patients negotiate adult communication – and lack of communication – about their illness (Clemente 2015)? Or, to pose a broader line of inquiry, how do persons with marginalized bodily experiences instantiate themselves as agents within discursive systems that deny them agency?

Such research also offers an important reminder that even unmarked embodied acts are imbued with social meaning, since physicality can never escape the semiotics of normativity. Hence the scholarship on disability and agency has also opened the gateway to a general sociolinguistic examination of how embodied experiences and sensations – the perception of color, smell, touch, sound, and feeling – gain their meaning both from cultural discourses of the sensing body and from physical encounter with the world (Harkness and Chumley 2013). These experiences include scientists' perception of color (Goodwin 1997), listeners' experiences of speech registers as tactile (Gal 2013), the affective touching of families in interaction (Goodwin forthcoming), and the enjoyment of food and flavor as a social activity (Ochs et al. 1996; Wiggins 2002). In short, even the experiences that seem most fundamentally physical and biological are thoroughly social, cultural, and ideological at their core.

#### *Objects, technologies, and language*

The research cited above is indicative of a larger shift across the humanities and social sciences to rethink agency as emergent from the interactions of entities that are both abstract and concrete. In this perspective, the body is imbricated in complex arrangements that include nonhuman as well as human participants, whether animals, epidemics, objects, or technologies. This pan-entity approach has been labeled *posthumanist* by a number of scholars (e.g., Hayles 1999; Barad 2003), but the decentering of human signification as the site of agency does not make posthumanism any less a theory about humanity. As Bruno Latour (2005) has argued in his development of actor–network theory within anthropology, an important touchstone for posthumanist approaches, the recognition that agency is distributed

across mutually evolving arrays of material and discursive interactants can lead to highly dynamic accounts of social life.

Linguists have understandably been hesitant to engage overtly with these paradigmatic shifts. Just as critical theory's discursive turn once validated our object of study, the posthumanist turn may seem to threaten to undermine it. And there are certainly concerns to be raised about Latour's rather schematic understanding of agency. Yet scholars working across varied fields in socio-cultural linguistics have contributed to a general posthumanist perspective for some time now, even if they rarely identify them as such and may not entirely align with these theoretical frameworks. At the leading edge of this development are studies of embodied human engagements with built objects and technologies of various kinds – whether involving archaeological tools (Goodwin 2000), digital video communication (Jones 2008; Licoppe and Morel 2012), photo and video sharing websites (Jones 2009; Thurlow and Jaworski 2011; 2014), mobile phones (Arminen and Weilenmann 2009), online gaming worlds (Keating and Sunakawa 2010), or surveillance monitors (Goodwin 1996). This area of scholarship dissolves the discourse–materiality dichotomy by analyzing semiosis as a process that emerges in the mutually constitutive actions that take place between human bodies and the other entities with which they interact. In these studies, objects and technologies may be seen not as static “things” that remain distinct from the bodies that deploy them but as participants that are complexly intertwined in the production of action, social meaning, and subjectivity (Neville et al. 2014; Goodwin forthcoming). If agency is “the socioculturally mediated capacity to act,” as Ahearn (2001: 112) states, then certainly built objects and technologies – as material entities that have profoundly altered communicative and social arrangements throughout human history – are integral partners in this mediation.

Research on computer-mediated communication has offered some of the richest analyses of the relationship between the body, technology, and language. Media theorists have long idealized cyberspace as holding the potential to liberate users from the constraints of physicality. But this perspective relies on a dichotomous understanding of the “virtual” and the “real” as separate interactional domains, with bodies seen as fluid in one but concrete in the other (Campbell 2004). Several innovative lines of research within sociocultural linguistics challenge this view by exploring how bodily practices are transformed in the interplay between these two domains. For instance, Rodney Jones (2009) examines the recursive feedback that takes place between the bodily practices of skateboarders and the digital images of their performances that they edit and upload to video-sharing sites. Such research considers not just how the body materializes in virtual environments, but also how virtual environments affect embodiment offline, a point that is especially dramatically illustrated by interactional research on the activity of cybersex (Jones 2008;



Adams-Thies 2012). From a different perspective, Elizabeth Keating (2005) illustrates how Deaf signers innovate new forms of communication and participation, and hence subjectivity, as they adapt their bodies to the constraints and affordances of online webcams. Following Donna Haraway (1989) and other theorists, Keating demonstrates in fine detail how technologies are not objects that remain distinct from the users that deploy them, but rather prostheses that extend and augment human capabilities. This scholarship convincingly shows that relationships between virtual and nonvirtual bodies, as well as the discourses in which they are embedded, are both contingent and dynamic.

The increasingly prominent role of multimodal communicative technologies in twenty-first-century sociality compels sociocultural linguists to develop new theoretical perspectives on identity, including a deeper consideration of the body's role in subjectivity. The sociohistorical emergence of communicative technologies such as stenography (Inoue 2011), the phonograph (Weidman 2007), the telephone (Bauman 2008), and the sound film (Taylor 2009) has the potential to produce dramatic shifts in language and subjectivity by facilitating the separation of voice from body (Bucholtz 2011). Indeed, the technologically augmented conversations that characterize sociality for much of today's middle-class youth are also having their effects on language and subjectivity, as localized engagement in social media circulates into discursive systems of identification, participation, and spectatorship that did not exist in previous generations (Gershon 2011; Mortensen 2015). In short, as technology extends our senses into the social world in new and unpredictable ways, it changes not just the way we interact but also our sense of self – a situation that demands the attention of an embodied sociocultural linguistics.

### Conclusion

The wide range of research topics examined here – the voice, style and self-presentation, discourses and counterdiscourses of the body, embodied motion and experience, and language, objects, and technology – demonstrates that an embodied sociocultural linguistics is already under way from a variety of analytic and theoretical standpoints. While such work has been fruitful in advancing specific subfields of sociocultural linguistics, we have argued that bringing these different areas of scholarship into dialogue with one another can further sociolinguistic theorizing of such fundamental concepts as indexicality, discourse, and agency.

In addition to the topics and concepts we have highlighted here, some of the issues that we see as especially important for an embodied sociocultural linguistics to take up are the following: What counts as a body, and as embodiment, for sociolinguistic theory? What would a comprehensive sociolinguistic theory of embodiment look like? How does a recognition of the role

of the body in communication force a reconceptualization of language and linguistics? How does the emergence of new technologies, such as the central role of digital media in late modernity, shape cultural understandings of the relationship between language and the body, and vice versa? How are embodied actions and practices ideologically linked to types of bodies, on the basis of race, gender, sexuality, age, (dis)ability, and other social categories, as well as culturally and interactionally specific roles? How does a focus on embodiment expand sociolinguistic theories of agency to recognize and accommodate the distribution of agency across human and nonhuman entities, such as animals, objects, and the environment? How does sociolinguistic research on the body help shift the field away from a mentalist theory of cognition by enabling a retheorizing of affect, perception, and knowledge as social stances performed through bodily action and interaction?

Although we do not have space here to discuss how a sociolinguistic theory of embodiment might begin to address these and other questions, investigations of all of these matters have already been taken up in different areas of sociocultural linguistics. As the field continues to reveal the close connections between language and the body, we urge researchers to enter into conversation with scholars examining this relationship from other analytic, theoretical, and disciplinary perspectives. Only through such dialogues can sociocultural linguistics develop a comprehensive understanding of language as a fully embodied, fully material phenomenon.

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