UC Irvine
UC Irvine Previously Published Works

Title
The Anthropology of Language (Introduction to EJ18)

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3m03z5bj

Author
Boellstorff, TD

Publication Date
2011-06-01

Peer reviewed

The Anthropology of Language
A Virtual Issue from *American Anthropologist*
By Tom Boellstorff
Introduction

The idea of a "virtual issue" is no longer novel: an editor or editors select a series of previously published articles in a journal around a topic or theme, and, using hyperlinks, the virtual issue is conjured into being on the Internet. The editor or editors usually provide a short introduction setting out the theme of the virtual issue and summarizing the featured articles. Virtual issues are a wonderful way to take advantage of the possibilities afforded by online technologies. They can be useful for research communities, bringing together a body of scholarship that might otherwise be time-consuming to access. They can be useful for teaching, as they provide instructors and students with ready-to-hand "course packets." Beyond the work of selecting the articles to include and (in most cases) writing an introduction like this one, they take no authorial or editorial labor and incur no production or circulation costs; they can help inform readers about the range of work published in a particular venue. Everyone wins.

But if this notion of virtual journal issues is not new, it is new to American Anthropologist (AA). This marks the first time in the journal's long history that a virtual issue has appeared, and I certainly hope that more will follow. For this inaugural virtual issue of AA, I have decided to take a route somewhat different than many virtual issues, one that leverages the specific strengths of AA as a flagship journal with, at the time of this writing, a 123-year history. Future virtual issues of AA may not include 86 articles, as this one does, but hopefully this example demonstrates that the format offers the possibility for larger collections beyond the roughly eight to ten articles that are otherwise the norm.

The theme for this inaugural virtual issue of AA is "The Anthropology of Language." I have deliberately chosen such a broad theme for two reasons. As someone whose first academic degree is in linguistics, I retain an enduring interest in language. Second, and more important, the broad theme enables me to select a relatively large corpus of work published in AA since its inception. This allows us to track ways in which language has been central to anthropological inquiry from its beginnings but in differing ways over the years and with differing linkages to other domains of anthropological scholarship. Some of the articles included in this virtual issue have probably not been read by more than a small handful of scholars. Others may not be so well-known to a broad audience but have played an important role in the history of anthropological engagements with questions of language. Others still are recognized classics in the anthropological literature.

To facilitate this goal of indicating anthropological work on language throughout the discipline's history, I have endeavored to include at least one article from each decade of AA's existence. Indeed, the very first issue of the journal featured an article on language (Brinton 1888), demonstrating an interest in the languages of North America that would remain a frequent theme (e.g., Chamberlain 1890; Gatschet 1899; Haas 1951; Henshaw 1890; Hewitt 1893; Mathiot 1962; Whiteley 2003). William Jones's 42-page article "Some Principles of Algonquian Word-Formation," published as part of his doctoral thesis, is notable for its brilliant linguistic insights. It is also notable as one of the only published works by the first American Indian to receive a Ph.D. in anthropology (as a student of Franz Boas), and who died at only 38 in conflicted circumstances while working in the Philippines (see Michelle Rosaldo,

Knowledge and Passion, Cambridge University Press, 1980; Renato Rosaldo, Ilongot Headhunting, 1883–1974, Stanford University Press, 1980).

Roland Dixon and Alfred Kroeber's "The Native Languages of California" (1903) was an important work in the history of linguistic classification, as was Edward Sapir's "The Na-Dene Languages, a Preliminary Report" (1915), Franz Boas's "The Classification of American Languages" (1920), Benjamin Lee Whorf's "The Comparative Linguistics of Uto-Aztecan" (1935), and Joseph Greenberg's "The Classification of African Languages" (1948). Greenberg's article is of special significance to me because I was lucky enough to study with him (and work as his informal secretary) for two years as an undergraduate, an experience that strongly shaped my intellectual career.

Articles that described the grammar of a language were quite common in the first half-century of AA's existence. Although such work has not appeared in the journal for some time, as there now exist a range of linguistic journals publishing such research, it was under my editorship that AA featured Jeffrey Quilter's "Traces of a Lost Language and Number System Discovered on the North Coast of Peru" (2010). I believe this was the first focused study of a language to grace the pages of AA in a 97-year period, since Edward Sapir's "Wiyot and Yurok, Algonkin Languages of California" (1913).

Even in the first decades of AA, articles appeared addressing questions of language in practice; for instance, "The Vigor and Expressiveness of Older English" (Fletcher 1891) and "The Language Used in Talking to Domestic Animals" (Bolton 1897). These questions of language in use continued with work like John Gumperz's "Dialect Differences and Social Stratification in a North Indian Village" (1958), Max Gluckman's "The Technical Vocabulary of Barotse Jurisprudence" (1959), Charles Ferguson's "Baby Talk in Six Languages" (1964; see also its forebear, Alfred Kroeber's "The Speech of a Zuñi Child" [1916]), Erving Goffman's "The Neglected Situation" (1964), William Labov's "Phonological Correlates of Social Stratification" (1964), Richard Bauman's "Verbal Art as Performance" (1975), M. A. K. Halliday's "Anti-Languages" (1976), Judith Irvine's "Formality and Informality in Communicative Events" (1979), Jane Hill's "Language, Race, and White Public Space" (1998), Joseph Errington's "Getting Language Rights: The Rhetorics of Language Endangerment and Loss" (2003), and Jennifer Roth-Gordon's "The Language That Came Down the Hill: Slang, Crime, and Citizenship in Rio de Janeiro" (2009; see also Arewa and Dundes 1964; Armstrong-Fumero 2009; Basso 1989; Besnier 1991; Briggs 1985, 1993; Doostdar 2004; Duranti 1992, 1997; Gumperz 1961; Gutiérrez-Estévez 1998; Mannheim and Van Vleet 1998).

Franz Boas's article "On Alternating Sounds" has played an important role in debates over cultural relativism (Boas 1889), raising issues about language and culture also explored in works such as Edward Sapir's "Language and Environment" (1912), Clyde Kluckhohn's "Notes on Some Anthropological Aspects of Communication" (1961), and Dell Hymes's "Introduction: Toward Ethnographies of Communication" (1964; see also Basso 1967; Keesing 1979; May 1956; Reichard 1950; Robbins 2001; Sherzer 1987; Silva-Fuenzalida 1949). This has included work on the topic of language and ideology (Chernela 2003; Friedman 2003; Friedrich 1989; Haviland 2003; Laitin and Gómez 1992; Makihara 2004; Rumsey 1990; Stromberg 1990).

Questions of language and cognition that overlap in important ways with these debates over language and culture were taken up throughout the journal's history, as in Claude Lévi-Strauss's article "Language and the Analysis of Social Laws" (1951), Charles Frake's "How to Ask for a Drink in Subanun" (1964), and Emanuel Schegloff's

"Sequencing in Conversational Openings" (1968; see also Doob 1957; Ember and Ember 1999; Ervin-Tripp 1964; Leone 1973; Lucy and Shweder 1979; Moore, Romney, et al. 1999; Service 1960; Singer 1980). This has included work on the biology and evolution of language (D'Andrade 2002; Falk 1980; Hill 1972; Lieberman et al. 1972; Orr and Cappannari 1964; Urban 2002).

Margaret Mead's article "Native Languages as Field-Work Tools" (1939) was one of the first explicit discussions about language and anthropological methodology; it spurred multiple commentaries in a manner unprecedented in AA's history (Elkin 1941; Henry 1940; Lowie 1940). C. F. Voegelin and Z. S. Harris's "The Scope of Linguistics" and "Training in Anthropological Linguistics" raised important issues regarding the increasing midcentury appearance of linguistic anthropology as a distinctive subfield (Voegelin and Harris 1947, 1952; see also Burling 1969; Gumperz 1974).

I could easily speak at much greater length about many of the fascinating articles collected in this virtual issue of AA, but a virtual issue is not the same genre as a review essay. Rather than synthesize in greater detail the contributions to this virtual issue, I encourage you to explore the articles yourself: each is only a click away. You may even stumble on the many other articles published in AA over the years addressing questions of language: 86 articles is a large number, but this represents at most half of the articles that could in some fashion fall under the rubric of "the anthropology of language." My goal has been simply to identify some signal contributions to the anthropological conversation on language so as to build interest in that conversation as it continues to flourish into the future.

URL: http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1111/(ISSN)1548-1433/homepage/virtual_issue_-_the_anthropology_of_language__introduction.htm (Accessed January 8, 2016)