ANTHROPOLOGY, LINGUISTIC

Linguistic anthropology examines the links between language and culture, including how language relates to thought, social action, identity, and power relations. It is one of the four traditional subfields of American anthropology, sharing with sociocultural anthropology its aims of explaining social and cultural phenomena, with biological anthropology its concern over language origins and evolution, and with archaeology the goal of understanding cultural histories. Linguistic anthropology has developed through international work across social science disciplines, as researchers attend to language as a key to understanding social phenomena. The discipline overlaps most closely with the sociolinguistic subfield of linguistics. But while sociolinguistics generally considers social factors in order to explain linguistic phenomena, linguistic anthropology aims to explain social and cultural phenomena by considering linguistic information.

Linguistic anthropology, as a part of American anthropology, has its origins in the work of Franz Boas's 1911 *Handbook of American Indian Languages*. Inspired by his work with Native American groups, Boas introduced the concept of linguistic and cultural relativism, the premise that a particular language or culture can only be understood with regard to its own internal logic. The concept of linguistic relativism was developed further by Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf, who argued that languages predispose the speakers to experience the world in particular ways. This axiom has come to be known as the “Sapir-Whorf hypothesis.” Researchers have since explored the extent to which language shapes thought, for example, with studies of color terminologies. These trends led to “ethnoscience,” a field of research founded in the 1960s that focused on the systematic ways of understanding the world that are encoded in language. This approach was strongly influenced by the work of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, whose analysis of language as an idealized social system set the foundations for the structuralist approach in anthropology. Recognizing the unique value of every language, linguistic anthropologists continue to document the grammars, cognitive maps, and traditional knowledge of threatened cultures and their languages in an effort to preserve and revitalize them.

The interest in language as a window on thought was paralleled by an interest in language as a means of acting upon the world. This line of inquiry drew on the work of philosophers John Austin and John Searle. They examined the performative function of language in speech acts (called performativity), actions that are accomplished as words are spoken, such as promising and marrying. Linguistic anthropologists extended the concept of performativity, viewing all language in use as a constructive activity and not just a means of relaying pre-existing information. Language is social action at many levels, from the construction of personhood and beliefs, to negotiation of social status between people, to the assertion of authority and group identities at the level of nations or transnational groups.

From analysis of contextualized speech acts, anthropologists John J. Gumperz and Dell Hymes introduced the ethnography of communication in the 1960s. This approach examines the rich cultural and contextual knowledge required to communicate competently, beyond knowledge of words and grammar. The speech community was proposed as a unit of analysis based on observed interactions, in place of pre-existing idealized categories. The ethnography of communication had much in common with the ethnmethodology approach developed in sociology starting in the 1960s by Harold Garfinkel and Erving Goffman. The methods of conversation analysis were elaborated by scholars in both anthropology and sociology, relying on analysis of recordings to uncover the rules governing interactions that usually function below the level of awareness (e.g., norms for turn-taking, timing, topic control, and other factors shaping social positioning). Linguistic anthropologists examine these interactional dynamics and rules across cultures and, among other things, seek to explain the reasons for cross-cultural miscommunication.

Discourse analysis expands from a focus on conversations to include analysis of language use in any context in both verbal and written form, including speeches, storytelling, ritual, performance, television, newspapers, and the Internet. Discourse analysis methods attend to both content and linguistic forms used (e.g., active or passive grammatical construction, inclusive or exclusive pronoun choice, formality of language) to show how linguistic forms affect people’s thoughts, actions, and identities. In linguistic anthropology, a major concern in the analysis of discourse is how inequalities of power are created, expressed, and manipulated through language. Also of particular interest are processes of socialization (how children or adults learn new social rules) and how agency (an individual’s ability to act) is expressed and enacted in speech. At the broadest level, analysis of discourse can also refer to examination of discourse as the systems of logic pervading a society (e.g., ways of thinking and talking about things, ways of arranging things in space) that shape social differences and power inequalities. This way of thinking about discourse was proposed by philosopher Michel Foucault.

The study of language as social action has also led to a view of language as a fluid, shifting, and heterogeneous medium, replacing Saussure’s notion of languages and cultures as discrete idealized units. Influential in this develop-
ment was the work of Russian linguists Valentin Voloshinov (Marxism and the Philosophy of Language) and Mikhail Bakhtin (Discourse in the Novel), who theorized that language is “heteroglossic,” its meanings never fixed but always emerging anew between speakers, shaped by histories of social experiences, intentions, and desires. This approach posits language as the site of struggles over social power, supporting the analysis of the role of language in political economy. This area of research examines in part how authoritative and prestigious languages are constructed, how named languages and correlating national or ethnic units and identities are defined, and how language values are negotiated in multilingual situations. Beginning in the 1990s, interest in the relationships between language, power, and identity led to a focus on language ideology, the ideological link between linguistic forms (e.g., different languages, registers, or word choices) and social forms (ethnic, gendered, socioeconomic, or other social distinctions). Researchers studying these topics examine the meaning-making processes and stances through which people construct identities, taking into account both historical trajectories and contemporary contexts of language use.

While linguistic anthropology overlaps with many other fields in its topics of inquiry, its distinctiveness as a field lays in its holistic comparative cross-cultural approach and fieldwork-based research methods.

SEE ALSO Anthropology; Boas, Franz; Culture; Discourse; Goffman, Erving; Identity; Inequality, Political; Inequality, Racial; Linguistic Turn; Logic; Performance; Power; Racial Slurs; Socialization; Structuralism; Theory of Mind

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Laada Bilaniuk

ANTHROPOLOGY, MEDICAL

Medical anthropology is the subdiscipline of anthropology that focuses on the intersection of health, medicine, society, and culture. Generally thought to include the study of the impact of disease on society and the impact of society and culture on health and disease, medical anthropology encompasses several different paradigms for research, including biocultural anthropology; ethnomedicine; social and cultural factors in the incidence, prevalence, and treatment of disease, or social epidemiology; the political economy of health; and the inclusion of cultural and social concerns in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of projects, which is the core of applied medical anthropology.

ORIGINS OF MEDICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

In 1978 George Foster and Barbara Anderson, following Khwaja Hassan (1975), suggested that the field of contemporary medical anthropology has four distinct roots that came together in the mid-twentieth century to form a recognized subfield of inquiry: the interest in variation in human morphology and paleopathology that began in the mid-nineteenth century, carried out in part by anatomists and early physical anthropologists; the culture and personality movement, or psychological anthropology, that began in the early twentieth century as both an offshoot of and a critical alternative to Freudian psychology but gained strength during World War II because of increasing interest in understanding the psychological makeup of the different cultures involved in that conflict; the study of ethnomedicine, which began as part of ethnography in the nineteenth century but became a focus of study for culturally oriented medical anthropologists after the posthumous publication of W. H. R. Rivers’s Medicine, Magic, and Religion in 1924; and the