

Anthropology News



Scales of Repair

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Exploring “Putting Things Right” at NCALA’s 3rd Annual Workshop, Charlottesville, VA

The recent focus on the concept of *scale* in linguistic anthropology makes relevant a discussion of the different orders of interaction at which we attend to repairing and reproducing social order. On April 19, 2014, National Capital Area Linguistic Anthropologists (NCALA) held its third annual workshop, hosted this year by the University of Virginia’s Department of Anthropology in Charlottesville, and organized by Eve Danziger (U Virginia), Brook Hefright (U Maryland) and Mark Sicoli (Georgetown U). Participants presented research on the theme “putting things right,” exploring how people deploy language and action to address perceived disturbances of different orders of interaction and to intervene appropriately.

This year’s theme attracted scholars from six institutions, including linguistic and sociocultural anthropologists as well as descriptive, theoretical and sociocultural linguists. Participants presented analyses of films, literary texts, social media, whistled speech, and face-to-face interactions, in settings as varied as a mathematics classroom and a *pétanque* court, and in regions as diverse as the US, Central America and Asia. What made “putting things right” work as a theme for a diverse group of scholars is that it invited reflection on the notion of *trouble*, and thus *order*, opening these concepts up for elucidation within and across different disciplinary perspectives, and across scales of analysis ranging from repair of word choice to repair of social relationships, or righting past wrongs perpetrated by institutions.

As was pointed to some years ago by the loosely defined program of ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1967), trouble is a methodologically useful focus since the reproduction of order depends on participants orienting toward it in generally unreflexive ways (Goffman 1963). Moments of trouble are times when order can rise to participants’ awareness, and their attempts to put things right can provide valuable insights into its achievement. From issues of lexical and grammatical choices in interactional sequences to the institutional and disciplinary practices of social actors in classrooms, therapeutic interactions, and field sites, order is itself made visible through its breach, and is defined through the subsequent moves to put things right. At the NCALA workshop, participants’ approaches included examining sequences of conversational repair as a “self-righting mechanism for the organization of language use in social interaction” (Schegloff, Jefferson and Sacks 1977:381), describing ethnographic cases of deliberate “trouble-making”, and investigating the ideological grounds that constitute linguistic and cultural orders.

At the most micro scale, Eve Danziger compared joint-task talk in English and Mopan Mayan to focus on differences in the availability of speaker intentionality as an explanation for trouble; Daniel Ginsberg (Georgetown U) explored student-initiated corrections of teachers in a university mathematics classroom to focus on differential access to authority; and Chip Zuckerman (U Michigan) described cheering and heckling on a Lao *pétanque* court to focus on participants’ competing interests. Claudia Brugman (U Maryland) and Sarah Wayland (Guiding Exceptional Parents) adapted the typology of frames of reference in spatial language (Danziger 2010) to propose a way of helping children with autism who struggle to process egocentric deictics in directives.

At the *meso* scale, Mark Sicoli analyzed repair organization in Chinantec whistled speech of Oaxaca, Mexico, showing how the affordances of this linguistically reduced channel for long-distance communication result in robust differences between the typological preferences shown in whistled conversational repair and those found in spoken language. Ellen Contini-Morava (U Virginia) described the use of gender markers that facilitate reference tracking in Mopan Mayan narratives to focus on the affordances of language itself to avoid trouble. Brook Hefright examined how bilingual users of Chinese and Bai repaired their utterances to make them “less Chinese” and “more Bai”; his analysis focused on how repair produces linguistic difference and reproduces the ideological hierarchy of language varieties in Southwest China. Ashley Williams (U Virginia) presented a paper showing how stancetaking and gender representation work both to celebrate and to censure ‘troublemaking’ in a popular blog. Daniel Lefkowitz (U Virginia) analyzed racial representations in different media versions of *The Help* to explore the affordances of particular dialects, registers, genres, and channels both in the creation of trouble and in its resolution.

At the most macro scale, papers explored how political and institutional histories constrain the capacity of present-day scholars and language community

members to “put things right.” Stephanie Hasselbacher (C William and Mary) presented on Koasati people’s current reactions to seventy-year-old field notes about their language. In present-day discussions of language revival, differences between documented and current usage were explained as fieldworker errors rather than as examples of language change. Lise Dobrin (U Virginia) and Saul Schwartz (Princeton U) highlighted a tension in linguistics between the desire for collaborative relationships with language communities and the disciplinary commitment to objectivity, which itself limits scholars’ ability to achieve collaborative relationships, as, historically, those relationships have been theorized out of the research process.

In focusing on trouble and its resolution at different scales, the papers together pointed to a set of processes and ideologies— from maintaining intersubjectivity in conversational sequence to transforming institutional practices—that function to define and maintain order.

NCALA was established in 2011 as a resource for scholars in linguistic anthropology and allied disciplines in the Washington, DC area. It facilitates dialogue among the region’s higher education institutions, as well as between universities and scholars in other institutional settings, including research institutes, museums, and government agencies. Scholars anywhere interested in continuing this conversation are welcome to join NCALA for its fourth year; please contact Brook Hefright at hefright@umd.edu to join the NCALA mailing list.

*Please send your comments, contributions, news and announcements to SLA Contributing Editors **Aaron Ansell** (aansell@vt.edu) or **Susanne Unger** (susanne.unger@gmail.com).*

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