Grammar—Function—Mind

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I have been given the task of discussing three of the most frightening keywords in linguistic anthropology: grammar, function, and mind. The mere mention of these terms can cause nonlinguists to blanch and mutter, and in fact traditional formulations of these three concepts have a similar effect on many linguistic anthropologists. This is because the terms frequently cluster with other alarming words such *as formalist, reductive, biological, psychological, teleological, universal, structural*. Some of these have already been mentioned by the panelists, and not necessarily admiringly.

If grammar, function, and mind arouse such suspicion, can they be recuperated for use in an intellectual climate that has deep misgivings about formalist, reductive, biological, psychological, teleological, universal, structural analyses? To anticipate, as well as to recapitulate what has already been said: Yes. Each member of this conceptual triad has something important to offer anthropology. But there are strong arguments against the familiar uses of these terms, and as Bonnie McElhinny discussed in her paper yesterday, no one knows this better than linguistic anthropologists.

To begin with, these terms are suspect because they all engage with questions of structure, a term that is itself often felt to be outdated at best, if not downright dangerous. All three concepts have been shaped by structuralist traditions but lack the theoretical distance from structuralism that would allow us to label them as safely poststructuralist. Certainly many of the other keywords that will be discussed later in this session fall on the safe side of structuralism. But these three have long been associated with a sort of unreconstructed structuralism, a concern

with how patterns—of language, of thought, of society—work and keep things working. The structuralist urge is to explain the status quo, not to locate the places where linguistic, cognitive, and/or social business as usual breaks down, is subverted, challenged, undermined, thwarted. And yet for most anthropologists, linguistic and otherwise, it is at these fissures that the real anthropological action happens.

The universalizing enterprise within which concepts of grammar, function, and mind have been elaborated has likewise generated grave doubt among anthropologists. The panelists' discussions suggest why: if these processes are transcultural, what is left for us to say about cultural specificity? And as a result of their universalizing tendencies, function, mind, and grammar all have uneasy relationships with a culturally situated view of agency, as Janet Keller points out. Formalist grammatical discussions, for example, expend a great deal of rhetorical energy asserting the creative dimension of grammar, yet what is meant by creativity usually turns out to be no more than the possibility of embedding yet another clause into one's well-formed, decontextualized, introspectively arrived-at sentence. The agency to make one's sentences as long as one likes is not up to the task of facing down ideology, hegemony, and other mechanisms of power that play central roles in anthropological analysis. Likewise, the rationalist individual who is the hero of Chomskyan syntax also figures heavily in much work on cognition and it too, like formal grammar, often is ultimately theorized as rooted in biology and hence in universals. By viewing grammar and cognition as endowments rather than achievements, traditional theorists sell agency short even as they celebrate humanity's rational capacity. Functionalist frameworks also attenuate human agency to the point where it is simple determinism, and they too may be based on the assumption of universal, even biological, imperatives.

Michael Silverstein's survey of how functionalist explanations have malfunctioned—by variously relying on biological, psychological, or cultural universals to enforce social stasis—concludes by offering a new perspective on function, one that is closer to the term's use in mathematics than in sociology or anthropology. The process of indexicality, whereby particular textual forms simultaneously project and produce social meanings—that is, contexts—is not teleological but historically contingent and interactionally emergent. Indexicality does not insist on a prior "functional" need that the indexical link steps in to fill. Instead, indexicality is itself a function—analogous to a mathematical function—in which two variables come to acquire a contingent association. This is a far cry from a Parsonian pairing of structure and fucntion, for it is dynamic rather than static, constitutive rather than regulative, to invoke ordinary language philosophy for the second time today.

Jack Du Bois puts the notion of culture to work for linguistic anthropology in much the same way that Silverstein uses indexicality: as a way of producing and displaying links between linguistic practices and social meanings. Keller points out that forging such links is a cognitive act as well as a social and cultural one, and, as she suggests in her discussion of conversation analysis, these cannot be entirely separated. The central project of conversation analysis, she notes, is the description of the strategies speakers use in interaction, of what they need to know to interact successfully. Although conversation analysts set aside the role of cognition in this process and restrict themselves to the analysis of the text, they implicitly commit themselves to a model of mind—of knowledge, cognition—that is jointly constructed in social interaction. The familiar divide between culture and the individual, self and society, breaks down when we consider the self not as separate from society but as emergent from it.

What I hear all three panelists arguing for, albeit in different ways, is a rethinking of these recalcitrantly structuralist, rationalist, universalist concepts, an approach that privileges the social and cultural without losing sight of the distinctive role of form, of cognition, and of meaning. Linguistic anthropology is particularly well suited for this task, for the theories and methods of discourse analysis that are prevalent in the field insist that we view language, cognition, and the purposes that motivate their use not as biologically determined or wholly individualized interior psychic phenomena but as social and cultural action. Du Bois gives a very convincing and detailed demonstration of this approach, and many of the people in this room provide other examples in their own work. In place of the litany of terms I recited earlier, these keywords in much recent linguistic anthropology invoke concepts like emergent, discursive, dialogic, rhetorical, poetic, political.

As a final point, what I would underscore in the very rich and thought-provoking discussion we've already heard is the importance of power—however we might want to theorize that keyword—in current models of grammar, function, and mind. Once we open up the possibility of a social and agentive model of structure—that is, once we move from social structure to social construction—we must address issues of unequal access to discursive resources, unequal authority to make social meaning or to invoke one's cognitive experience. Otherwise we will be vulnerable to the same problems that defeated earlier structural analyses. If the current state of linguistic anthropology, including the present papers, is any indication, however, the task of rethinking function, mind, and grammar with a sensitivity to these and other issues is already well under way.