SIL Electronic Book Reviews 2005-014

Ethnosyntax: Explorations in Grammar and Culture

Edited by N. J. Enfield


Reviewed by Jamin R. Pelkey
SIL International and La Trobe University

Introduction

“Grammar is thick with cultural meaning.” So begins Enfield’s introductory chapter to Ethnosyntax, a fascinating collection of essays and case studies exploring links between grammar and culture. According to Enfield, the term “ethnosyntax” was coined by Anna Wierzbicka in the late 1970s, but an interest in the ways morphosyntax intersects with cultural dynamics has been a theme in linguistic analysis since Franz Boas noted the phenomenon in 1911 (pp. 4–5).

Enfield structures the book into three parts: “Ethnosyntax: Theory and Scope” (chapters 1–4), “Culture, Semantics, and Grammar” (chapters 5–8), and “Culture, Pragmatics, and Grammaticalization” (chapters 9–12). I will briefly examine each of these chapters in turn and then offer an evaluation of the book’s approach along with a few applications and possible directions for further consideration.

Ethnosyntax: Theory and Scope

Enfield’s introductory chapter provides the framework and background for the remaining eleven chapters of the book. Enfield makes an important distinction between the “narrow” and “broad” senses of “ethnosyntax.” The “narrow sense,” notably championed by Wierzbicka, looks for specific grammatical constructions whose semantics can be demonstrated to encode culture-specific meanings. The “broad sense” on the other hand searches for cultural-grammatical relations further afield in such phenomena as social constraints on grammatical choice and the ways in which culture influences grammatical description itself. Enfield holds, however, that these two senses are by no means mutually exclusive. When researchers ask, for example, how culture influences change in morphosyntax or semantics, they ask a question that spans whatever gap may exist between the “broad” and “narrow” senses of the term. A further important point Enfield makes in his introduction is that an interest in ethnosyntax does not necessitate a wholesale affirmation (or rejection) of Whorfian linguistic relativity. After all, grammatical
universals may, in fact, indicate the presence of cultural universals. The book does not seek to argue on these grounds that all grammatical phenomena are culturally constrained, however.

Chapter 2, “Syntactic Enquiry as Cultural Activity” by Anthony V. N. Diller and Wilaiwan Khanittanan, lays further groundwork for understanding the broad sense of ethnosyntax. With a specific application to zero anaphoric references in Thai and Lao discourse, Diller and Wilaiwan contrast the nature of grammaticality judgments made by professional linguists with those made by native speakers. The authors argue that judgments of utterances as “acceptable” or “abnormal” in Thai and Lao discourse are inextricably linked to one of two distinct perspectives: the professionally trained imagination of linguists, on the one hand, and the culturally constrained interpretations of native speakers on the other.

Chapter 3, by Cliff Goddard, is entitled “Ethnosyntax, Ethnopragmatics, Sign-Functions, and Culture.” Goddard begins his chapter by offering further case-examples of the distinction between broad and narrow applications of ethnosyntax. He then transitions into an array of grammar-culture topics such as the use of key words as focal concepts in Russian and cultural scripts as conduits of normative syntax rules in Anglo-American English. He introduces these topics in order to argue that language is, in fact, a semiotic subsystem of culture. This leads Goddard to the conclusion that an accurate metalanguage is needed for the study of language in culture.

Chapter 4, “Culture, Cognition, and the Grammar of ‘Give’ Clauses,” wraps up the first section of the book by looking into cross-linguistic comparisons of ethnosyntax. In this chapter John Newman focuses specifically on ‘give’ clauses in six languages (Amele, Japanese, Chipewayan, Maori, Nahuatl, and Zulu). These widely diverse languages focus on separate components of the ‘give’ event through distinct grammatical constructions. Japanese ‘give’ verbs, for example, vary in their lexical form according to the relative status of the giver and recipient and the identity of the speaker. Chipewayan, on the other hand, marks its ‘give’ verbs with classifiers in order to encode whether or not the transfer was done in a controlled or uncontrolled manner.

Culture, Semantics, and Grammar

Chapters 5 and 6 both deal with gender issues in ethnosyntax. In Chapter 5, “Masculine and Feminine in the Northern Iroquoian Languages,” Wallace Chafe makes a link between a morphological pattern in Northern Iroquoian and historically reported conceptions of male and female behavior. In Chapter 6, “Using He and She for Inanimate Referents in English: Questions of Grammar and World View,” Andrew Pawley examines the use of masculine and feminine pronouns for the animation and personification of otherwise inanimate nominals in Australian and American English (e.g., using ‘she’ to refer to a car or ‘he’ to refer to a turnip). Both of these studies conclude by asserting that such gender choices are marked in syntax below the level of conscious choice on the part of speakers.

In Chapter 7, “A Study in Unified Diversity: English and Mixtec Locatives,” Ronald W. Langacker applies principles from cognitive grammar to a cross-linguistic analysis of locatives. Although Mixtec uses metaphor and metonymy much more overtly than English to mark spatial relationships, English also relies on such strategies. Langacker holds that the constructs of
cognitive grammar enable an analysis that affirms both the unity and the diversity of locative constructions in English and Mixtec. He finds it difficult, however, to move from this conclusion to positing codified connections between syntax and culture in these two systems.

In Chapter 8, “English Causative Constructions in an Ethnosyntactic Perspective: Focusing on Let,” Anna Wierzbicka proposes that English causative constructions are semantically and lexically rich due to the development of democracy and personal autonomy in Anglo society. She contrasts English causatives with their German and Russian counterparts, holding that English causatives are markedly different in culturally contiguous ways. Through her trademark use of “natural semantic metalanguage,” Wierzbicka shows that the causative let in English encodes a sense of “refraining from doing something to other people,” a semantic property that has no parallel in German or Russian and is highly culturally significant. Wierzbicka’s conclusion asserts that “cultural elaboration”—usually noted in lexical distinctions such as the proverbial proliferation of words for ‘snow’ in Eskimo languages—is just as relevant in syntax.

**Culture, Pragmatics, and Grammaticalization**

In Chapter 9, “Changes within Pennsylvania German Grammar as Enactments of Anabaptist World View,” Kate Burridge examines a curious pair of changes in the use of two Pennsylvania German modal verbs. In the first, the modal verb wotte ‘to wish’ defies normal paths of grammaticalization in that it has shifted from being more grammatical (with less semantic content) to less grammatical (with more semantic content). In the second, the modal verb zehle ‘to count’ has become grammaticalized in an unconventional way. Speakers seem to favor these modal verbs due to their understated and tentative qualities and use them for referring to personal wishes in the case of the former and future events in the case of the latter. In both cases underlying worldview issues seem to be behind otherwise unpredictable shifts.

Chapter 10, by Enfield himself, is entitled “Cultural Logic and Syntactic Productivity: Associated Posture Constructions in Lao.” In this chapter Enfield discusses serial verb constructions in Lao with an eye to the way in which culture interacts with the grammatical acceptability of utterances and the interpretation of specific events. Serial verb constructions in Lao that combine a posture verb with an action verb depend on “cultural logic” and typicality for their use, interpretation, and grammaticality.

Chapter 11, “Aspects of Ku Waru Ethnosyntax and Social Life” by Alan Rumsey, discusses links between linguistic structure and ethnic culture in Ku Waru, a language spoken in the Western Highlands of Papua New Guinea. Rumsey presents data on Ku Waru existential clauses, pronoun systems, poetic parallelism, and paired compounds. Rumsey convincingly notes that a cultural affinity for making pairs and viewing things in pairs has strong links with these linguistic practices.

Chapter 12, by Jane Simpson, is entitled “From Common Ground to Syntactic Construction: Associated Path in Walpiri.” Simpson dedicates her chapter to proposing a theoretical basis and practical methodology for “narrow” ethnosyntax as a discipline. She proposes her methodology with reference to a process of grammaticalization that is taking place in Walpiri. One of the notable challenges she describes for carrying out research in narrow ethnosyntax is the ability to
establish the presence of “common ground” between speakers of a given language upon which to base conclusions.

**Further Discussion**

Overall, *Ethnosyntax* offers a rich introduction to a fertile field of study. Linguists of all persuasions, especially descriptive comparativists, should take note. Looking to cultural norms for the explanation of elusive or opaque grammatical phenomena should provide not only more customized explanatory power for grammatical description, but should also enable a more detailed understanding and appreciation of a given culture. This is especially true of languages that do not yield easily to traditional European assumptions.

Three further examples from Tibeto-Burman languages, a language family absent from Enfield’s collection, may be helpful for further reflection. First, Hopple (2003:300) notes that the pervasive occurrence of nominalization in Burmese is best described by incorporating a recognition of corresponding cultural values into the analysis. Hopple defines these values as “balance and harmony, distance of the observer from the phenomena, and Buddhist detachment.” Second, in applying Role and Reference Grammar to verb classes in Phowa, a Tibeto-Burman language of the Ngwi branch, I also stumbled across issues of grammaticality and social constraints on meaning similar to those that Diller and Wilaiwan (pp. 31–51) and Enfield (pp. 231–258) note for Thai and Lao, with the following twist: when testing the grammaticality of utterances in Phowa one must be careful to ensure that the aspectual semantics of a given utterance have not shifted to an alternate meaning due to “cultural logic” and typicality (Pelkey 2004). Third, Bradley (2001) examines a grammatical construction unique to a number of Ngwi languages in which a classifier system breaks the rules of unmarked NP constructions in order to provide a shorthand for counting kinship relations.

In this connection, we may note that Bradley (2001) incorporates both cross-lectal and diachronic evidence into his research. With the possible exception of Chafe’s chapter (pp. 99–109), these components seem relatively absent from the analyses of Enfield’s authors. Bradley’s work suggests that incorporating historical and comparative analyses more broadly would add more muscle to the current ethnosyntax program.

A further possible critique of the current ethnosyntax approach is that many of the leading theorists in the field still assume grammar and culture to be essentially and functionally distinct. This allows for little more than analogical overlap between grammar and culture, in ways that are reminiscent of the great phenomenological/noumenal divide in Kantian epistemology. Although Goddard holds that “…language has a privileged place in culture itself and in the study of culture” (p. 70) and Rumsey speaks of “…understanding how grammar meets (the rest of) culture” (p. 284), many of Enfield’s authors seem to retain a relatively bifurcated view of the two and, referencing the dangers of circular reasoning, are often remarkably timid to assert clear, decisive connections between cultural and linguistic observations. LaPolla’s (2003:114) lucid perspectives on the nature of language seem especially relevant to such concerns (emphasis mine):
…a language and the rules for its use in a particular society are a set of social conventions which have evolved in the particular way they have in that society in response to the need to constrain the inferential process involved in communication in particular ways thought to be important in that society. These conventions (or some subset of them) become habits of the individual speakers of the language. These conventions and habits are no different in nature from other types of conventions and habits that have developed in the society for performing particular actions… As each society develops (evolves) its own particular sets of conventions (linguistic and non-linguistic), each set (in totality) is unique to that society and so manifests the way that society construes and deals with the world. That is, the habits and conventions for carrying out actions (including communication) of a society reflect habits and conventions of thought.

While LaPolla himself retains a linguistic/non-linguistic distinction, he clearly considers both linguistic and non-linguistic conventions to be members of a common class—both comprised of socially constrained actions that spring from (and influence) socially constrained thought. Essentially, language and culture are both systems of social conventionalization.

All critique aside, I heartily recommend Enfield’s book to all who savor and study the sounds, syntax, and symbolism of ethnic social systems.

References


