People & Organizations ❖ Jobs ❖ Calls & Conferences ❖ Publications ❖ Language Resources ❖ Text & Computer Tools ❖ Teaching & Learning ❖ Mailing Lists ❖ Search

LINGUIST List 16.1600

Wed May 18 2005

Review: Discourse: Scollon & Scollon-Wong (2004)

Editor for this issue: Naomi Ogasawara <naomi@linguistlist.org>

What follows is a review or discussion note contributed to our Book Discussion Forum. We expect discussions to be informal and interactive; and the author of the book discussed is cordially invited to join in. If you are interested in leading a book discussion, look for books announced on LINGUIST as "available for review." Then contact Sheila Dooley at collberg@linguistlist.org.

Directory

Message 1: Discourses in Place: Language in the Material World

Date: 16-May-2005
From: Susan Olmstead <olmstes@uah.edu>
Subject: Discourses in Place: Language in the Material World

AUTHORS: Scollon, Ronald; Scollon, Suzanne Wong
TITLE: Discourses in Place
SUBTITLE: Language in the Material World
YEAR: 2003
PUBLISHER: Routledge (Taylor and Francis)
Announced at http://linguistlist.org/issues/15/15-1106.html

Susan Olmstead-Wang, Department of English, University of Alabama, Huntsville.

OVERVIEW

Discourses in Place is the first book to explore systematically the question of geosemiotics: how language and signs make meaning in relation to where (and when) they are physically placed in the world. A primary focus of geosemiotics is indexicality in which signs depend on their context for meaning. Unlike icons such as modern brand logos, which mean the same thing no matter where they are found, indexical signs depend on what they point to for their meaning. Building on the work of Edward T.

Hall and Irving Goffman, the Scollons study how people take up positions and relationships with others in social interactional order. Kress and van Leeuwen's visual semiotic framework provides the basis for analysis of signs as parts of a semiotic structure system that includes code preference, inscription, and emplacement. The Scollons' work, drawn from examples in Asia, Europe, and the Americas, demonstrates that globalization challenges one's intuitions about reading signs and understanding indexicality in the world.

This important book presents systematic observations about discourses in place(s), of theoretical implications, and of material which can be used in a course on public discourse. In keeping with a book about reading and interpreting signs in real-world context, this text provides clear reading cues including introductory, explanatory, and summary material which help to move complex arguments forward and to allow readers to pick up and read separate chapters as they choose. A comprehensive outline in text-box form (p. 20-21) provides a very helpful overview and relevant selections from it in each chapter keep the reader linked to the overall structure. Excellent photos and charts guide readers through (necessarily) complex theoretical arguments. Theory and application are paired in several ways in the text: practices are found at the end of Chapters 2-4 and 6-9, and photo illustrations (a gathering for tea, street corners in 5 cities, Chinese lettering in signage) are placed throughout the book. A handy glossary and readable endnotes help make the book layout friendly.

SYNOPSIS

Chapter 1 focuses more on the indexable world than on systems of indexicality in language, which have been studied elsewhere. Geosemiotics, part of an approach to how situated meanings point to a larger discourse, links discourse analysis, linguistics, and communication in a framework of interpretation for social action and meaning making. Following Goffman, Scollons' geosemiotics studies social actors where they live, act, and "give off" social signals in the "interaction order."

Chapters 2 through 4 focus on social interaction and on image and text representation. Chapter 2 considers key questions of indexicality including how signs locate and produce meaning and how language points to, and reflects from, the place in which it is situated. Three types of indexicality are space, social relationships, and time. Iconicity, indexicality, and symbolism are not exclusive categories; they are overlapping concepts in complex relationship. For example, indexicality of physical gestures alone may not give all necessary information about reference; symbolization may also be needed for an accurate interpretation. Major indexicals include demonstratives and deictic adverbials, personal pronouns, and tense and time adverbials. Indexicality of the social actor may be relative, for example, to the speed with which a driver approaches a road sign and to the speed with which the driver is able to interpret the sign.

Chapter 3 begins geosemiotic analysis and focuses on how people use the interaction order to accomplish discourse in the world. Goffman argues that our bodies take on social role performances, produce the interaction order, and index the world by "kit" or "sign equipment." Here the Scollons

extend Goffman's theories so that indexicality in language includes
frontstage and backstage presentations, expressions that one gives and
gives off, and the dynamics among people in the same social space. When
describing the interaction order, the Scollons discuss Goffman's 'with'
as "a social group that is very important for the study of geosemiotics"
including a relative notion of who is a "with" and who is not. Following
Hall's suggestions about socio-cultural patterning (of time, of spaces, of
proxemics), geosemiotics builds on the theory of "social actor." Socio-
cultural patterns of time are interpreted in relation to a clock standard,
a sense of urgency, and a sense along the continuum/dichotomy of
monochronism-polychronism. Patterns affecting perceptual spaces include
visual, auditory, olfactory, thermal, haptic (tactile) as they demark
different kinds of space and/or different semiotic zones. Proxemics, the
study of interpersonal distances, reflect social distance and personal
fronts as they display the intentions of social actors.

Chapters 4 through 6 focus on visual semiotics in signs as representations
of the interaction order. Chapter 4 addresses Kress's and van Leeuwen's
understanding of visual semiotics as a form of constructed presentation of
framed images selected by a photographer (in contrast to random
snapshots). Extending this understanding, the Scollons focus on four main
semiotic systems: represented participants, modality, composition, and
interactive participants. Represented participants in a composed picture
demonstrate a narrative relationship between or among themselves, often by
means of a vector of gaze. Modality, the "truth of credibility of
statements realized linguistically" (p. 89) is specific to sociocultural
groups. Composition is the way in which information systems make "real"
or "new" information salient or prominent in a display. A principle of
geosemiotics at work here is that if two systems are in conflict, situated
semiotics override decontextualized semiotics. In an image, interactions
among participants may be between participant and producer, among
participants in the picture, and/or between viewer and participants.

Chapter 5 represents a transition from the first chapters, which discuss
the social world, the interaction order, and principles of visual
semiotics to the remaining chapters (5-9), which focus on place semiotics.
It applies concepts from visual semiotics and examines how signs placed in
the world connect their meanings in time, in space, and in the social
world through language. The authors use a photo and a prose description of
a particular interaction (a street beggar) at a particular point in a
sequence of social interaction (the point at which he receives a coin
donation) to show indexical relationships among the parts. They illustrate
the relationship between meaning and "the active work of the social
construction" of performances in public or social places (p. 107).

Chapters 6 through 8 describe code, preference, inscription, and
emplacement, key elements of place semiotics. Chapter 6 shows that visual
images take their meaning from where they are located in the world. In
semiotic spaces, pictures display a code-preference selected from among
center-margin, top-bottom, left-right, and earlier-later, or other
semiotic conventions. A code may symbolize something (for example, a
romantic time period or foreign tastes) while not necessarily indexing a
particular community (for example, an English-speaking audience). In order
to know enough about whether a code preference is based on geopolitical

indexing or sociocultural associations, interpreters look for evidence outside the signs themselves. Focusing on Chinese-English bilingual signs, the authors point out that there may be multiple codes within a single sign or picture. Although placement is usually the most important indicator of code preference, local laws may dictate that one language must be placed in the more salient (preferred) position on the sign. This makes it hard to determine whether text/code placements reflect carryover from colonial days (for example, in Hong Kong) from the international/ global sphere (in which the same code choices are in service to two different ideologies) or from other forces at work.

Chapter 7 discusses problems of code preference in inscription including what material signs are made of. Inscription is based on the physical materiality of language and it includes fonts, material, layering, and state changes. In China, traditional characters can have double association with the most ancient, or the most modern values. Simplified writing shows conservative, socialist values. Materials may reflect time (permanent, temporary) or quality. Layering of indexicality, state changes (neon signs, traffic lights) or denied (hidden) inscription (a new car model is concealed for unveiling).

Chapter 8 addresses a central concern of geosemiotics: where the sign or image is physically placed. Three systems of emplacement, decontextualized, transgressive, and situated, explore the question of whether emplaced discourse is "socioculturally authorized" or not (p. 145). Decontextualized semiotics are those which always appear in the same form no matter the context, including brand names. Transgressive semiotics is any sign in the wrong place (including a transgressive reading vector). Situated semiotics is at the heart of geosemiotics because meaning depends on where the sign is. Exophoric indexicality links what is on a sign to what it refers to in the real world such as an exit sign that points outside its own frame. Chinese writing is "exploitable" in that it allows text vectors to be left to right, right to left, or top to bottom. When geosemiotic systems interact, a vector references the physical world outside the sign. Following Kress and van Leeuwen, the authors understand four small meaning systems to interact: a text vector system, a construction system, a preference system, and an indexicality system. Authors argue that where semiotic systems interact, situated semiotics render meaning more clear than decontextualized semiotics (p. 159) and they warn against mistakes in interpretation including overgeneralization from "closely-situated semiotics" (p. 159).

Chapter 9 takes up the topics of place orientation and discourse orientation. At the intersection of interactional order and the human-made environment, multiple discourses come together (centripetal movement) to organize the spaces in complex aggregates. Comparing discourses at street corners in five cities around the world, the Scollons found that discourses (including traffic regulations, commercial rules, infrastructural discourses) influence each other in "interdiscursive dialogicality" (p.167). Dialogicality reflects prior discourse and anticipates future discourse. In addition to a centripetal coming together of discourses, a centrifugal strategy may trace one discourse through a semiotic aggregate. In geosemiotics, this web of social discourse and physical place affect each other. Physical places include 4 types of

spaces (exhibit and display, passage, special use, and secure) in which a
variety of semiotic discourses interact in groups of various sizes. The
authors apply the theories discussed here to the concrete example of
gathering for tea in which discourse is shaped by spatial arrangement of
tables and chairs, seating order, and many other factors. In comparing
convergences at the 5 street corners, the authors found that 8 discourses
(related to regulatory, infrastructure, commercial or transgressive
discourses) were present in all instances and used in complex, overlapping
ways.

In Chapter 10, the authors return to an earlier action orientation, draw
conclusions for the book, and highlight implications of their theory. The
Scollons follow K. Burke's suggestion that underlying metaphors or
generative narrative organizes our thinking and they suggest that human
action (including discourse) arises from prior experience and is embedded
in interaction order and complex performance. Four elements (actor,
interactional order, visual semiotics, place semiotics) bring actions
together. Physical place and interactional order are two systems of
interpretation that work together such that one discourse produces a sign
but another discourse interprets it in double indexicality. Our actions
produce identity and they index discourse in place. Signs mean, in part,
by where (when) they are placed. An action selects a subset of signs and
moves on that selection. History, physical environment, and previous
dialog converge at a point in space. The future of geosemiotics may inform
how language is located in the material world and will link disparate
fields. Because indexicality is often taken for granted and is differently
expressed in different languages, conscious focus on it will inform
intercultural contact.

EVALUATION

Discourses in Place is a pioneering study that establishes the field of
geosemiotics. It does so by extending key concepts, applying ethnography
as a focal strategy, linking several areas of study, and suggesting
implications for several related fields. The Scollons "make visible
invisible observations" (p. ix) in interesting and complex ways.

The authors do an excellent job of conceptualizing and extending relevant
theories of Goffman, Hall, Kress, and van Leeuwen while acknowledging the
limits of this initial study. They look forward to expanding the research
to include constructs and categories that are defined and refined by socio-
cultural groups not necessarily reflected in this study, which is reported
in English by researchers based in North America.

By working within a framework of ethnography, the authors acknowledge an
inclusive, flexible approach to a social group's ways of seeing. Native
intuitions are especially necessary in determining what system of values
is at work in a preferred semiotic interpretation.

In addition to drawing from several strands of sociolinguistic research,
the Scollons' approach links studies of face-to-face communications,
visual semiotics, signs as placed in the physical environment, and
sociopolitical language policy, especially in China.

I noted, however, one missed opportunity to make a significant argument link and a couple of minor, distracting editing inconsistencies. In the Preface, the authors recount Elio Antonio de Nebrija's creation of a grammar of Castillian Spanish to illustrate how language has often been used to "control diversity and produce social uniformity" (p. ix). However, they seem miss an opportunity to highlight this anecdote as an example of a constructed language whose indexicality to the society in which it was (was to be) situated was weak or disconnected. Although they note that not even the queen herself spoke Castillian, they focus on socio-political implications and not explicitly on this disruption between language, reference, and emplacement. The development of Castillian as a preferred form of Spanish has implications for other language policies, including the spread of simplified Chinese characters.

Because of the content of the following passages, a couple of minor editing problems seemed ironic. When discussing a photo of icons in Chapter 2, the authors refer to "the symbol 'X' (in red)" (p. 26). In fact, the photos are shown as black and white with the 'X' hardly visible at all. This kind of mistake appears again in Chapter 9 where the prose description indexes "the man in the green shirt" (p. 179). These minor editing problems are probably related to last minute changes at press but they point up a problem of indexicality related to changes of state (from color to black-and-white photos) and a problem of making signs and what they index match properly over time or during an evolving process.

Another example of the text not matching its content is a long sentence, which has several insertions and complex grammar. Rather than direct readers clearly, the sentence structure juxtaposes conflicting deictics and pointing vectors which send the reader around and around the city in question.

"There is also a continuum in the design of public spaces between highly designed and controlled places where only certain clearly defined social actions and interactions may occur -- a busy street intersection allows only certain types of traffic to pass in certain sign-designated times, many cities prohibit street vendors -- and much more loosely designed and loosely controlled places; often these are socially marginalized places or zones such as back alleys or peripheral regions of a city." (p. 169)

CONCLUDING REMARKS

By emphasizing the necessity of considering both sign and emplacement, geosemiotics has implications for code-switching research. Recently, relationships between two languages spoken in one conversation have been explored in terms of one language being dominant, while the other has been seen as non-dominant. In this book, the Scollons argue that signs, including those which employ more than one code, language, or text vector, can be fully understandable only when seen in context. Like bilingual signs, code-switching functions along the interface of complex systems and requires complex, situated interpretation.

Geosemiotics is well poised to consider socio-political developments in public policy regarding codes and code placements, especially in Hong Kong, and changes in how Chinese languages and written codes develop in

China, Taiwan, and elsewhere. Although Nebrija wanted to limit language to diversity, the globalizing world needs geosemiotics as an approach to cross-cultural communication which acknowledges the situated nature of language.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Susan Olmstead-Wang researches Mandarin-English code-switching and teaches graduate TESOL courses at the University of Alabama, Huntsville.

Respond to list|Read more issues|LINGUIST home page|Top of issue

Print This Page

Please **report** any bad links or misclassified data

LINGUIST Homepage | Read LINGUIST | Contact us

While the LINGUIST List makes every effort to ensure the linguistic relevance of sites listed on its pages, it cannot vouch for their contents.