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INTIMATE GRAMMARS:
ANTHROPOLOGICAL AND
PSYCHOANALYTIC ACCOUNTS OF
LANGUAGE, GENDER, AND DESIRE

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Loco motion

The desert heat was oppressive. The flies were a constant presence on mouth, nostrils, and eyes. It is 1896. Baldwin Spencer and Frank Gillen are camped just west of Alice Springs, Australia. Gillen has arranged for Arrente men and women and their surrounding Aboriginal neighbors to gather nearby to perform a repertoire of their rituals in exchange for food, tobacco, tea and protection from pastoralists and police. Baldwin Spencer is a zoologist, Frank Gillen a telegraph operator. Both men aspire to be the intellectual leaders of an emergent Australian anthropology. So every day they direct photographers, scribble notes, sit with now nameless older Arrente men, who themselves sit and struggle to answer the river of questions Spencer and Gillen direct at them about the ceremonies they are performing. At times the heat must have overwhelmed everyone. But Spencer and Gillen were happy to sweat, to inhale flies, to stretch a cramped leg. They knew the unprecedented nature of what they were witnessing. Before their eyes was unfolding virtually the entire corpus of central desert male culture. The Arrente and their neighbors were performing and describing nearly every initiation, increase, and conception ceremony they owned. The ethnography Spencer and Gillen published based on these performances would become the touchstone of an ensuing generation of aspiring anthropologists.¹

At times Spencer and Gillen's eyes must have wandered from their writing and passed over the distended bellies of Arrente children and over the buckshot scarred backs of Arrente men and women. When Spencer lay his wax matchsticks on the ground to help Arrente informants map out their genealogies he must have heard full or fragmentary stories of the epidemics, poisonings, and massacres which accounted for the dead ends of numerous Arrente family trees. But *Native Tribes of Central Australia* does not focus on these scandalously mistreated bodies. Instead it turns to what they and the emergent Australian settler nation considered to be the moral scandal of Aboriginal ritual practices.

¹ See Stocking (1995), pp. 94–8. See also Mulvaney *et al.* (1997).

The text turns and speaks to public anxieties about the secret truth of Aboriginal corroborees reported in a variety of mass-mediated texts: newspapers, popular settler memoirs, and amateur ethnologies. Aboriginal men's sacred corroborees included group sex. Yes, Spencer and Gillen write, it is true,

considerable license is allowed on certain occasions, when a large number of men and women are gathered together to perform certain corroborees. When an important one of these is held, it occupies perhaps ten days or a fortnight; and during that time the men, and especially the elder ones, but by no means exclusively these, spend the day in camp preparing decorations to be used during the evening. Every day two or three women are told off to attend at the corroboree ground, and, with the exception of men who stand in relation to them of actual father, brother, or sons, they are, for the time being, common property to all the men present on the corroboree ground.²

Spencer, Gillen, and most of their successors took it to be self-evident that what they saw (or heard about) was "sex" between "men" and "women"; that when they and the Arrente pointed to a sex act they were pointing to the same field-of-action; that this sex act had a social syntax, men sexually exploiting women; and, finally, that an indigenous gender hierarchy could be read off this sexual activity. And though part of an emergent relativist paradigm in the social sciences, Spencer and Gillen also took as self-evident what constitutes a normal sexual relation.

The first is the normal one, when the woman is the private property of one man, and no one without his consent can have access to her, though he may lend her privately to certain individuals who stand in one given relationship to her. The second is the wider relation in regard to particular men at the time of marriage. The third is the still wider relation which obtains on certain occasions, such as the holding of important corroborees.³

In *Across Australia* (1912), a book written for a general audience, Spencer and Gillen intensified their normative characterization of ritual sex, describing indigenous ceremonies as consisting of "naked, howling savages" engaged in bodily acts that were "crude in the extreme."⁴ Why do Arrente men sexually use women during their sacred ceremonies?

The natives say that their presence during the preparations and the sexual indulgence, which was a practice of the Alcheringa, prevents anything from going wrong with the performance; it makes it impossible for the head decorations, for example, to become loose and disordered during the performance.⁵

Spencer and Gillen move on, but we might pause for a moment. What might the Arrente men have said and meant that Spencer and Gillen paraphrase as "it makes it impossible for the head decorations . . . to become loose and disordered during the performance"? And why did they presume that it was sex that Arrente "men" were having with Arrente "women"?

² Spencer and Gillen (1899), p. 97. ³ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

⁴ Spencer and Gillen (1912). See also Spencer and Gillen (1927).

⁵ Spencer and Gillen (1899), p. 97.

It may seem odd to begin a review of contemporary studies of language, gender, and sexuality with a historical sex scandal. But it probably seems far less odd to most sociolinguists and linguistic anthropologists to begin this way than with Sigmund Freud's interpretation of Spencer and Gillen's texts or with Geza Roheim's Freudian interpretation of the phallogocentric symbolism of Arrente rituals.⁶ Who could blame them? Many contemporary scholars of language grind their teeth when they read or hear psychoanalytically informed accounts of language, especially Lacan's account of the signifier, of the phallus as the master signifier, of language as organized around lack, of desire as the difference between demand and need, of woman as (k)not (*la femme n'existe pas*). They revolt against Lacan's near exclusive reliance on and algebraic contortions of out-dated models of post-Saussurian linguistics, social theory, and continental philosophy; his extrapolation of universal psychic economies from particular European language structures; and his conflation of textual and locutionary aspects of denotation and predication.⁷

The unsettling sound of grinding teeth is heard even though, *maybe because* many scholars of gender and sexuality in linguistic anthropology share with Lacanian psychoanalysis a common intellectual genealogy and seem to share common intellectual interests; namely, to understand how gendered and sexual subjects (loosely, men and women) become gendered and sexual subjects *as such* through *language*;⁸ how these gendered subjects come to have desires and to have these desires organized in normative and non-normative ways; and, finally, how, in certain cultural contexts, a sexed body and its sexual desires function as the defining index of social identity. Provide any further specificity to their accounts of language, the unconscious, gender, and sexuality, however, and psychoanalysis and contemporary linguistic anthropology quickly part company.

For their parts, Lacan and the *école freudienne* did not pretend an interest in language as a phenomenon in itself. Lacan was, instead, consumed with understanding the "passion of the signifier," a strangely catholic view of the psychic transubstantiations that human beings undergo as they become subjects *as such* through language.⁹ Lacan's interest was in the psychic effects of the fact that human beings become sexed subjects through language. Thus while Lacan understood sexual difference to be the signifying difference of language (the Other), neither the linguistic details of how language signals sexual difference nor how it entails gendered subjects were what interested Lacan in the last instance. He chased what the subject's emergence into the linguistic order (having a language) foreclosed and set into motion: being and desire

⁶ See Freud (1989); Roheim (1973, 1974).

⁷ For critical attempts to read psychoanalysis against semiotics see Crapanzano (1993, 1998); Kristeva (1980); de Lauretis (1984); Cameron and Kulick (2003).

⁸ Lacan (1977a), p. 78. See also Mitchell (1985); Grosz (1990); and Copjec (1994).

⁹ Lacan (1977a), p. 79.

respectively. In contrast, it is exactly language that anthropologists working in the paradigms of sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, and pragmatics are interested in – the structure and function of language and their role in constituting the normative frameworks that contribute to the “laying down” of a person’s gender and sexuality and to the ability of human subjects to make commonsense judgments such as: “Such-and-such gendered-person’s desire and/or sexual practice is normal” and “Such-and-such gendered-person’s desire and/or sexual practice is queer.”

It is exactly these sharp divides between psychoanalytic and anthropological approaches to language and the subject that present a mutual challenge to each of these disciplines. The challenge Lacanian psychoanalysis poses to linguistic anthropology, sociolinguistics, and pragmatics is how to study language, desire and gender, without reducing them to each other. The challenge linguistic anthropology poses to psychoanalytic accounts is equally formidable: to reformulate an account of sex difference that is based exclusively neither on European language structures nor on post-Saussurean structural accounts of language; but, instead, situates an account of gender and sexuality in the semantic and pragmatic, metasemantic and metapragmatic conditions of being *and becoming* a human subject in the context of the coercive and consensual social institutions in which this being and becoming occurs. This chapter will barely tickle the still incubating surface of the monstrous beast I am proposing be born. I suggest two modest proposals as a way of beginning: first, that we attempt to theorize what I am provisionally describing as an *intimate pragmatics* by articulating recent work in metapragmatics and gender with a psychoanalytically inspired account of subjectivity and desire.

“Might be girl”: the linguistic emergence of gender and sexuality

Over the last fifteen years or so anthropologically informed studies of language, gender, and sexuality have formulated a rigorous and robust methodological and theoretical apparatus for understanding the relationship between the semantic, pragmatic, and metapragmatic features of language and the social production, maintenance, and reproduction of normative gender and sexuality. They have examined in ever-finer detail grammatical and pragmatic systems of “gender,” “sex acts,” “sexuality,” and “affect.”¹⁰ Scholars of language and gender have also begun to understand how grammatical and pragmatic aspects of language invest corporeal and psychic economies with particular gender, sexual, and affective systems; how they demarcate and entail social space (the private, the

¹⁰ For a review of contemporary approaches to language and gender see Bergvall, Bing, and Freed (1996); Bucholtz, Mary and Kira Hall (1995); Cameron (1995); Hall and Bucholtz (1995); Hall, Bucholtz, and Moonwoman (1992); Harvey and Shalom (1997); Holmes (1995); McConnell-Ginet (1988); Mills (1995); Philips, Steele and Tanz (1987). For language and the emotions see Besnier (1993); Irvine (1990); Abu-Lughod and Lutz (1990); Lutz (1990); Rosenberg (1990).

public, the intimate and the ritual, the secular, the taboo); and how they constructively contribute to material and symbolic systems of value, domination, and exploitation. We now have a fairly good idea of how languages signal the gender of a noun phrase and its referent through various prefixes, suffixes, and particles. Unfortunately, many anthropological studies of gender and sexuality do not situate the gender of Noun Phrases in other semantic senses and levels, nor do they detail the dialectic between semantic and pragmatic structure and function. Instead, many studies of language and gender, linguistic or otherwise, present fairly superficial gender and sex counts – three sexes and four genders, two sexes and three genders, one sex, and two genders.¹¹ For all the variation between linguistic structures suggested by these studies, Lacan's basic argument that all human beings must enter through the doors of something recognizable as grammatical gender seems unchallenged. All languages seem to semantically encode gender and have the means to attach semantic gender to human corporeal difference. What varies are the sociological and pragmatic aspects of these semantic categorizations and indexical processes.

Whatever "gender" and "sexuality" are and whatever "critical linguistic" projects develop in relation to them, these studies have demonstrated the usefulness of embedding an analysis of gender and sexuality in semantic, pragmatic, and metapragmatic discourses and functions.¹² This framework allows us to articulate the most delicate structures of grammar to the most dramatic social contestations of power. Take for instance the intersection of metapragmatic discourse and function on social relations of gender. If pragmatic function refers to those features of language that encode context and the context-presupposing and entailing nature of language usage, metapragmatic discourse includes all implicit and explicit references to such encodings, usages, and (im)proper contexts of usage.¹³ Likewise, metapragmatic function includes the means by speakers, usually unconsciously, invest their interlocutory acts with various gender classes or gendered registers in order to cohere them into interpretable (i.e., coherent) texts. Metapragmatic function is what provides speakers with the means of building up from pragmatic acts higher order textual phenomena (genres, frames, conversations). Whereas in its pragmatic function "she" entails and presupposes a context, in its metapragmatic function "she" points to and in the process coheres (articulates) a here-and-now illocutionary action to an external context and an internal unfolding text. Metapragmatic function is, therefore, critical to how textual and interlocutory phenomena (including individuals, their gender, their culture) are rendered coherent, durable, and seemingly detachable from their local contexts.¹⁴ Metapragmatic function also

¹¹ See, for instance, Trumbach (1994); Besnier (1993); Herdt (1994); Tan (1995).

¹² For "critical linguistics" see Cameron (1995); Harvey and Shalom (1997).

¹³ See also Lucy (1993) and Lyons (1977) for "reflexive language." See Bakhtin (1986) for "speech genre."

¹⁴ See Silverstein and Urban (1996); Lee (1997), esp. pp. 277–320; Derrida (1982).

creates a sense of a perduring temporal order out of the actual volatility and transience of sense-making. While every denotational sign can, indeed must, resignify an entire prior sequence of meaning ($s^1 \dots s^2$ is in real-time $s^1 \dots s^2$ modified by $^1 \dots s^1$ modified by $^2 \dots s^3 \dots \sim$), metapragmatic function ensures that most communicative exchanges, indeed “culture” itself and identities within it, say gender, are experienced as a perduring coherent-enough totality.

In languages such as English, gender is part of the coherence-entailing metapragmatic apparatus of denotation and predication; that is, gender functions not only pragmatically and semantically, but it metapragmatically draws on these two linguistic dimensions – and usually unconsciously – to bind and cohere communicative action. For instance, in its standard average heteronormative English usage, “she” conveys a multiplex of semantic signals (number, person, gender) as it pragmatically indexes sign to context. But “she” is also drawn into metapragmatic work, regimenting ongoing pragmatic indexicality into a coherent interpretable text and interlocutionary event. To change the gender aspect while maintaining number and person – to switch to “he” or “it” or to switch randomly between “she,” “he,” and “it” – would seem to render meaningless the text’s sense and value. Thus gender is a building block of the delicate intimate attachments of human society but not in the usual sense: gender delicately attaches conversational and grammatical texts to their internal and external contexts and cotexts – as it is, or seems to be, attaching one person to another. Conservative language critics of feminist language projects sense but misdiagnose this metapragmatic function of grammar when they accuse feminists or queer activists of incoherency or worse. They are not wrong in this limited sense: in standard average presumptively heteronormative English semantic and pragmatic coherence depends upon the formal indexical order of albeit ideologically loaded grammatical categories of gender.¹⁵ But we see fairly immediately, however, that all “coherent” segments of language are in fact implicit metapragmatic discourses embedded in dominant or minority formal or informal social institutions. In English the refusal to abide by normative rules of pronominal usage only *seems* to render the semantics of an average English conversation, well, queer – ill-formed, dysfunctional insofar as it is contra-normative, if not anti-normative. In fact, it rends the implicit metapragmatic discourse of heteronormativity and its institutions while in the process building new speech genres and their subjects of enunciation.¹⁶

All these pragmatic and metapragmatic functions and forms along with their semantic senses and values are “neutral,” if densely ideologically saturated, linguistic givens at any given moment of social spacetime. I use the term “neutral” to remind us that these functions and forms are non-intending semiotic

¹⁵ See also Silverstein (1985).

¹⁶ See Leap (1995); Livia and Hall (1997); Ogawa and Smith (1997).

architectures. They may be the explicit and implicit material on which we base our social presuppositions – the grounds upon which we make sense and meaning. Nevertheless, these linguistic facts simply are. And, insofar as they are, they can be regimented into new discursive forms. What social work they are pulled into is the emergent result of institutionally mediated interactional usage. Paraphrasing Ochs, the variable use of linguistic variants must be conventionalized before they can function as gender (or other social) deixes. A gender difference must be made out of a semiotic difference, linguistic and corporeal difference fashioned into gender ideology: the “ought to be” of corporeal and vocal normativity, the “how” of “this is how language and corporeal hexis ought to be articulated, where, for what purpose.”

These denotational and indexical aspects of language use become, and are always already, a part of social relations when social agents who, often unknowingly, draw on the metapragmatic function of language and on one or another aspects of grammatical signaling to regiment indexical and semantic actualities into higher order gendered registers (or gendered speech genres). These genres are then part of the means by which subjects are disciplined in the how, who, when, where of *proper* gendered language usage and subsequently the proper meaning and usage of various social spaces (public, private, intimate, ritual, secular). Modals, qualifiers, quantifiers, negatives, and other aspects of language are a critical part of the apparatus of gender normativity and its contestations. These grammatical functions support and/or are themselves part of the signaling means by which new gendered registers are created. But whether nonsense indexicality is actually being used to lay out (entail) an actual semantic or social space or whether current structures of sense and meaning are being transformed into new senses and meanings, these always already existing pragmatic excesses and structures always already provide the means of potential new social spaces.

Studies on language socialization, linguistic ideology, and symbolic domination make clear that language is a key symbolic technology through which individuals are interpellated into hegemonic gendered social orders and, therefore, a key site of social struggle. Some of the best research in language and gender has focused on the social processes through which linguistic discourses and functions are drawn into social struggles over gender and sexual roles and values. Unfortunately, most of this research has focused exclusively on the metapragmatic discourses that link men and women to forms of talk, leaving uninvestigated how gender and sexuality emerged across global colonial and postcolonial spacetime. In order to suggest how gender and sexuality emerged in these contexts let us return to the conversations between Spencer, Gillen, and the Arrente as a case study of how persons are interpellated into gendered social orders. In particular, let us examine how these men mapped semantic structures across languages as they discussed ritual. How were gender and sexuality conveyed between English and Arrente? Does understanding the means of gender (and sexual) conveyance help us understand the relationship between gender

(and sexuality), subjectivity, and language? How did Spencer and Gillen contribute to the emergence of a “Western” entity-of-action (a sex act, gender, and sexuality as perduring essential qualities of humans rather than aspectival qualities of objects passing through states) from indigenous grammatical and pragmatic orders through the simple practice of pointing and through the simple desire to understand something about local ritual practices?

To begin with and to state the obvious, the Arrente were not simply speaking among themselves and with other regional indigenous groups. They, Spencer, and Gillen, were attempting to communicate across significantly different semi-otic orders under real-time, often brutal, conditions of power, exploitation, and domination. Baldwin Spencer arrived in central Australia believing Frank Gillen to be a fluent speaker of Arrente only to find his “knowledge of Arunta (and several other Aboriginal languages) was in fact rather less fluent than Spencer had assumed.”¹⁷ Therefore, the Englishmen communicated with the Arrente men and their neighboring groups in an English-based pidgin. When speaking with Arrente men about their ritual practices, Spencer and Gillen describe themselves as using a pidgin form of English in order to point to and diagramming the action Spencer and Gillen understood to be “sex” or, perhaps, using a local Arrente term they understood to mean “copulation.” And it is not unlikely that the Arrente men responded either with a series of codeswitches between the same pidgin and local languages or in some other form of English translation. If “sex” secured headdress to head, it did so only after “*that*” (or its English-based creole equivalents) secured two very different semantic fields to each other, that is, *before* any actual or significant meaningful realignment of either semantic system had occurred.

Let me bring the lens even closer and pause over what could be considered the most minor, if not meaningless, of colonial exchanges, the historical and grammatical substitution of “sex” for “that.” At some point in time, whether before or after Spencer and Gillen arrived in Central Australia, indexical signs such as finger pointing or demonstratives opened a coherent-enough communicative channel between the Arrente and European settlers. These indexical signs secured two very different semantic realms of sense by first securing each semantic realm to an agreed upon point-of-reference. Again, in a strict sense, this agreed upon point-of-reference preceded any agreed upon sense-construal. Each group brought to the communicative event the conscious and unconscious “ought to be” of entities, actions and their modifications across contexts that marked the deep presuppositional normative structures of their “culture.”¹⁸ Thus, even the agreed upon point-of-reference would have taken time to secure as an entity-of-action was slowly detached from a local semantically and pragmatically embedded field-of-action.

¹⁷ Stocking (1995), p. 92.

¹⁸ For a fuller discussion of what these structures and practices might have entailed see Povinelli (2004).

As Spencer and Gillen pointed to the action they understood to be “sex” – using their fingers, diagrams, or demonstrative pronouns (“that”) – the index “that” would be slowly replaced by the indexical and symbolic function of “sex.” In other words, as the Arrente struggled to understand the referent of “that,” “that” slowly worked its way into the sense-making structures of Arrente lives and it made a bridge across which “sex” could travel. Whether in their presence or out of the range of their hearing, the Arrente discussed what Spencer and Gillen could possibly mean by their questions, what their questions suggested about European views of humans and their environments, and what they themselves could and could not discuss as a matter of ceremonial law and interethnic “etiquette.” Over time, the domain of excluded discourse would include the very actions Spencer and Gillen were so fascinated by – ritual sex, sex in public, sex out of the institutions of monogamous “marriage.” And, over time, physical and corporeal spaces would be reoriented and differently inhabited. Sex would lay out space and social relations not in ritual terms but in terms associated with sex, privacy, intimacy, shame, and titillation.

The substitution of “sex” for “that” entailed a displacement not only of a demonstrative pronoun by a noun phrase but of one system of meaning by another. “Sex” slowly rearticulated the total order of indigenous semantic and pragmatic meaning, entextualizing new value-laden references and predications, the where, when, with whom (or what), for what, and meaning what aspects of British-derived understandings of normative and non-normative sex acts. As it did, space came to refold itself, the ritual less physical, the intimate a private property, the public as the hidden hand of power. In these real-time social interactions “that” appears anew as a grammatical grappling hook, a means of securing one semantic and pragmatic system to another, an instrument of seizure, a prelude to corporeal discipline proffered as the pragmatic means of escaping physical violence. In the light of these pragmatic practices, the question “why do you do *that*?” strays from its original referent and is resignified as a metalingual commentary on the act and orientation of translation in colonial contexts.

This resignification is masked, however, by the entextualization strategies of Spencer and Gillen. Sex expands its seemingly natural and universal sense-making reign because Spencer and Gillen utilize conventions of reported speech, quotation, and indirect quotation in such a way as to make the Arrente appear to be the authors of the very referential practices they are struggling to understand. Richard Parmentier reminds us “the quotation of authoritative discourse surrenders only momentarily to the hierarchical rank inherent in [the] reported discourse, for these official or traditional words are in fact put to uses unintended by their authors or not implied in their initial contexts”.¹⁹ Spencer and Gillen use direct and indirect quotation, in large part,

¹⁹ Parmentier (1993), p. 263.

to signal the liberal scientific nature of their conversations with Arrente and their neighbors.

But the conversations in which the Arrente were engaged mock the liberal ideal of a rational communicative event excisable from fields of force. The Arrente were all too aware that one aspect of colonial power was being bracketed by another equal and opposing colonial force. As they danced and talked, the Arrente and their neighbors were in the midst of being systematically exterminated, having their ritual objects stolen, lost or destroyed, and having their lands taken and with them life-sustaining material and spiritual resources. In exchange for allowing them to record their rituals, Gillen and Spencer offered the Arrente and surrounding Aboriginal groups food and protection from police and settlers. Obviously, force was not removed from the scene. Quite the contrary. Force was the very condition of communicative action.²⁰ Vast inequalities of power provided an incentive for the Arrente to orient their utterances, if ever so subtly, to the context in which Spencer and Gillen were embedded and which they were creating. And it incited Arrente to detach, if in the beginning ever so slightly, a segment of their semiotic life-world and use this segment (“that”-“sex”) as a means of building a somewhat coherent common language between themselves and these European men.

Focusing on these seemingly minor interlocutory events and their semantic structures, at least in the first instance, allows for a more subtle model for thinking about the mechanics of sexual hegemony, especially for how normative systems are maintained or how they emerge through the articulation of dissimilar elements in a real-time social interactions.²¹ These “utterances and their types” are “the drive belts” allowing us to develop a more rigorous methodology for maneuvering among vastly different scales of event and orders of social domination.²² And they remind us that institutions of force are always part of the tacit presupposed background conditions of communication and corporeal hexis.

The subject of language

What then is the relationship between gender, metapragmatically understood, subjectivity and desire? To answer this question, it is important to view subjectivity as an order of phenomenon distinct from semantic and pragmatic orders of phenomena. This distinction suggests a limit within contemporary metasemiotic theories as they pertain to the (gendered, sexual) subject of language.²³ By the “subject of language” I do not mean the topic of language. I mean, instead, to refer to the human subject who is the product of language and to language

²⁰ See Calhoun (1995). ²¹ See Laclau and Mouffe (1985), see esp. pp. 85–88.

²² See Bakhtin (1986), p. 65.

²³ See Silverstein on the possible construal of the function(s) of semantic and metapragmatic orders of phenomena as distinct from each other in “every essential characteristic” (1993), p. 34.

as the dialectical product of being the communicative medium, instrument, or device of human subjects.

Let me review, briefly, the linguistic anthropological approach to the subject. As I noted above sociolinguists and linguistic anthropologists have side-stepped the formal relation between the pre- and post-linguistic, thus, gendered subject. But they have also bracketed the question of how natural human languages, in their pragmatic and semantic dimensions, bare the imprint of their status as a *human* language. Linguists do not ask: does the phenomenological condition of being the communicative medium of beings who become speaking subject leave its imprint on the structures and functions of language? Silverstein's understanding of the relationship between semantic and pragmatic orders of linguistic phenomena point us to the importance of this question and lays down the conceptual apparatus that demands it be answered. For, if we agree that a semantic order is not accessible except through some act of language usage (i.e. is inferred through pragmatic or metapragmatic acts), pragmatic and metapragmatic orders of natural human language usage likewise entail a *subject* using that language and a subject who once could not use that language. How might language, gender and desire reappear from the point-of-view of this subject? Let me suggest what is at stake in this shift in perspective from the sign's point-of-view to the subject's point-of-view by first discussing the dyshesion between language and context from the perspective of the subject.

Language cannot exhaustively master context in part because context is the always-shifting total result of a group's divergent denotational and predicational systems. From a semiotic perspective (a sign-eye's view) individual denotational and predicational presuppositions and entailments always diverge from others within the same linguistic group, even if ever so slightly. All subjects in a language group are certainly subjected to that language. But they are not subjected identically. As Ben Lee (1997) has noted though the "creative indexical properties of performatives bring about the conditions that make the utterances true" performatives also fail to bring about the conditions that would make them true without reserve, left-over, debris.²⁴ Performatives cannot saturate context because they, like all language acts, are linked to numerous, if delicate, differences in the presuppositional grounds of subjects, grounds on which subjects evaluate an event including its performative felicities. The bottle never hits the ship and the ritual percussionist never hits every beat according to the necessarily varied presuppositions and expectations of each and every member of the performing and on-looking crowd. They hit "*well enough*," "*better than last time*," "*in ways we can all agree on*," "*near perfectly, but did you see her shoes!*," "*well, true she should not have worn them, but that doesn't matter, does it?*"

²⁴ Lee (1997), p. 57. For Austin on performativity see Austin (1962, 1979). For gender and performativity see Butler (1985); Livia and Hall (1997).

The origin of these presuppositional differences can be accounted for, at least in part, in purely semiotic terms. As I noted above, the building blocks of new registers come from whatever pragmatic, semantic and metapragmatic forms and functions make up the linguistic material of a community of speakers. All the possible “types of interactions,” “types of social identities,” “types of agential states associated with type of social identity” and all the semantic and pragmatic means by which these types are regimented provide speakers with the material to inlay one speech genre into the domain of another and thus create new speech and text genres. These entextualizations may be the result of an intentional creative subject, the visions of a psychotic, or part of a social movement. In any case, one normative register is laid into another and in the process resignifies the entire discursive contour of the speaking community.

Entextualization is an ongoing feature of everyday language usage as speakers draw on metapragmatic functions to articulate what they are doing, where, and with whom. The quotidian nature of these semiotic mappings and remappings are a critical part of social struggle. For example, feminists have used the quotidian ideals and expectations of how “humans” or “liberal democratic peoples” ought to speak to one another to resignify normative ideals and expectations of how women and men ought to speak to one another. Habermas’s discussion of the emergence of a particular form of bourgeois liberal subjectivity in eighteenth-century Europe is another relevant example of these genre extensions, entextualizations, and refigurations. The long-distance free traffic in economic news created by early capitalist trade led to aesthetic innovations in public and private textual forms and to subsequent social expectations about how speech should be regulated in the emergent space of the public sphere.²⁵

But if language provides speakers the means of producing interactionally coherent texts, it also provides them the means of producing syntactically coherent sentences that challenge or flaunt social norms or usages. Take for instance the perfectly grammatical: “He might be a man” or “Some men are men” the implication being that “At least one man is not a man.”²⁶ These social deictics may or may not have an obvious corporeal or behavioral context or reference. But they do have a social effect. If little else the listener wonders their meaning. “What do you mean some men are men? What are you saying? What or who could make a man otherwise than a man and what would this ‘otherwise’ consist of? No. A man is a man. Unless . . .” This imaginary fragment of introspection demonstrates, once again, that a divergent space between normative grammatical and social gender simply exists. It is. Its actuality makes it available for mean-making if social agents find it, deploy it, make something of it. Lacan certainly did with such infamous propositions as “*La femme n’existe pas*” and

²⁵ Habermas (1993); Fraser (1993); Hanson (1993); Gal (1998); Berlant (1997).

²⁶ See Levinson (1983), pp. 97–166; Lacan (1977b).

"Il y a d'l'Un." In the first moment, the pragmatic function of "some men are men" might be little more than a thin interpretive wedge driven into normative masculinity. But over time the silent, oft debilitating, interrogation of the interrogative, "Are you the one?" might reconstitute the normative expectations not only of masculinity but the social institutions regimenting and regimented by this genre.²⁷

Grammar itself provides speakers with the means of signaling the conditionality of any and every given instance of language structure and usage, every proposition whether normatively or counter-normatively structured. Consider this stretch of modals: "Maybe I should talk like this to be a woman. Maybe I shouldn't"; "Maybe I am a woman, maybe I am not"; "Maybe I shouldn't have, but it's too late now"; "These might be the right contexts, conditions, people for me to express myself in this way. They might not be." These "might bes" and "maybes" mark a potential "otherwise" that speakers can always index *no matter there exists no actual content* for that otherwise *as of yet*. Whether used to buttress normative linguistic regimes or to show the ongoing failure of gender normativity, these grammatical features provide the material stuff of real-time social struggle. They point to a "condition of uncertainty" and thus possibility residing in the perduring presuppositional structures of language and society even if, in the first instance, this condition of possibility is nothing more than an empty grammatical space.

The source of this feeling of uncertainty (or, possibility) is in part the result of a speaker's metapragmatic sense: her sense of the implicit and explicit alternative forms that exist in her language and of the metapragmatic mapping that coheres and recoheres these forms. But this feeling, this modal pulsion, also derives from another order of phenomena: subjectivity. It is certainly true that before a subject is even partially aware of it doing so, language is laminating into her tacit rules of gender that become the strongly presuppositional structures she must assume to emerge as a proper subject-of-(an)-enunciation. A purely grammatical presupposition and entailment of gender becomes the condition of being-articulate and articulated into the recognizable. Gender designations entail. They are performative. In English, for instance, grammatical gender makes adjectival common sense in at least three ways: It makes sense to her. It makes sense for her. It makes sense of her.

However, as social agents (parents, teachers, day-care workers, ritual celebrants) are mediating the lamination of tacit rules of gender into individuals,

²⁷ Susan Gal has noted that these mappings across discursive registers are always already implicated in structures of power. She notes that although "the ability to make others accept and enact one's representation of the world" is a critical "aspect of symbolic domination . . . such cultural power rarely goes uncontested" especially when "devalued practices propose or embody alternate models of the social world." Gal (1991), p. 177. For the negotiation of meaning see Ehrlich and King (1996); Goodwin (1993); Herring, Johnson, and DiBenedetto (1995). See Povinelli (1993) for a socially situated discussion of the use of modals in Aboriginal society.

individuals are laminating language with the traumas and corporeal sensations they associate with the intimates who make up their lives. Remember, from the subject's point of view, linguistic grammar is initially only inferable through pragmatic and metapragmatic instances of language usage. For instance, the prelinguistic subject must infer from the use of the term "he" a system of number, person, and gender. That is, the grammatical sense and value only appears through the pragmatic and metapragmatic practices of other subjects and in the contexts of differential risks to the prelinguistic subject herself.

A strong version of the "subject of language" would argue that the various orders of linguistic phenomena themselves must carry in the signal form, function, or capacity the condition of being the communicative medium of a particular form of beings, a human being who becomes speaking subject. How we would demonstrate this imprint is not altogether clear to me. Nor is it clear what implications should be drawn from the difficulty of methodologically accounting for what makes phenomenological sense. But let us not worry, at this point, about these numerous dangers and instead re-examine modality from the perspective I am proposing. As we know, modality grammatically marks the degree of commitment a speaker has to a proposition. But modality might also be seen as a metalingual signal of language's dependence on a subject who must become a speaking subject. The childish form of "might not be" might signal not only a logical-semantic aspect of language, but first and foremost the experience of becoming entailed by a semiotic form as a necessary condition of being social and, at the same time, the experience of being before such an entailment. In short, the pulsion Lacan termed desire might be grammaticalized in linguistic forms like mood and desiderata.

I call these early and subsequent disturbances and grammaticalizations of social language norms a person's intimate pragmatics. Roman Jakobson referred to a related phenomenon as "individual langue" – a personalized linguistic code demarcated by a person's avoidance of "certain forms or certain words that are accepted by society but that seem unacceptable to him for whatever reason or to which he has an aversion."²⁸ If "social langue" maintains the unity of a society, "individual langue" reflects and maintains "the unity, that is, the continuity, of the individual identity."²⁹ A person's intimate pragmatics would include the specific delicate structures of a grammar, such as the learning of proper and improper gender classification, reference, and identity; and it would include the fine phonological features of a social register that lays out social space in the act of speaking.³⁰ But it would also include the fragmentary specters of countless microdiscursive and corporeal encounters, part subjects and trace memories, non-linguistic hopes, aspirations, disappointments, corporeal surfaces, and contours laminated into phonological features, lexical

²⁸ Jakobson (1990), p. 90. ²⁹ Jakobson (1990), p. 91.

³⁰ Such as do polite registers, for instance, see Errington (1988); Keating (1994); Siddell (1998).

choices, syntactic patterns. Inversely, the grammar itself would signal the provisionality of every actual proposition – metapragmatically shaped segment of meaning.

These intimate pragmatics are critical to understanding the dynamism of society, for they destabilize the very language of normative intimate community that regimenting institutions of language are meant to stabilize. They do so because a person projects, or more precisely, extends her intimate pragmatics into every scene she enters. These intimate pragmatics migrate unperceived with individuals as they enter and transgress public and intimate spheres, orienting their expectations, and demands, accounting in part for why no one ever quite “gets” what they are trying to say. “Why don’t you understand what I am asking of you? Don’t we both speak the same language?” Strictly speaking the answer is “no.” But again, the answer is no not simply because social language is the totality of the divergent individual language composing it. The answer is strictly no because language is not simply a semiotic phenomena. It is a phenomenon whose material conditions, as well as social conditions, make it otherwise than simply itself.

In other words, an individual’s intimate pragmatics is not simply the code itself, but rather the code and the desires it disturbs and is disturbed by. What disturbs social language and transforms it into individual language is not language *per se* but, at least in part, the pre- and non-linguistic affective and corporeal attachments, needs, imaginaries, and material surfaces that language marks-marked and impedes-impeded. These affects and imaginaries are certainly regimented in the individual code, but strictly speaking, they are not identical with that code. Here, psychoanalytic and dominant anthropological approaches to language, gender and sexuality diverge. Psychoanalytic desire does not refer. It is not any specific encoding of emotion, feeling, emotional categories, emotional discourse, or discourses on emotions.³¹ It cannot be reduced to “linguistic encodings” which “constitute distinct and describable phenomena,” to “discourse on emotions,” or “emotional discourse” (phatic function), although these provide a trace of its movement. Emotion may be a useful translation of desire, but only if emotion is understood in its root sense as an incitement, a movement defined by a motion not towards any specific thing, but out and away from every positioning; i.e. every proposition such as “I am a woman,” “This is not sex,” “Doing this makes headdress stick to head.” Or not, depending upon how effective the glue is.

In sum, rather than normative grammatical and social gender articulating neatly with each other across diverse contexts, and both of these semiotic phenomena neatly articulating with the phenomena of subjectivity, each order must be continually secured to the other and to the corporeal substances, psychic

³¹ See Abu-Lughod and Lutz (1990) for a typical approach.

economies, social spaces and actions that make up their presupposed and entailed contexts and referents. Pragmatic and metapragmatic discourses and functions provide language with delicate and robust means of “securing” denotational text to bodies, contexts, institutions, and psyches. And bodies, contexts, and material spaces provide surfaces, densities, malleability, lumpiness, hollows, and solidities against which language must contend. But a variety of social agents and agencies are needed to regiment and discipline the use of these linguistic and non-linguistic forms to impede or prod the inherent play of linguistic innovation and its resultant social modifications. These agents and agencies include our most intimate allies, teachers, friends, lovers, who prod us to speak like a *proper* he or she, gay or straight, and our most distant consociates, academic or state officials legislating excitable or pornographic speech in the public sphere, on campus, in town commons, through the internet and parcel post.³²

In these ordinary and extraordinary circumstances, in these intimate and intimidating spaces, children and adults learn not only the particular content of linguistic domination/incitation but also its specific form (“do not to speak like that” or “say it this way”) and the variegated risks entailed in speaking otherwise. They then extend this form of linguistic domination and risk across various social institutions of work, intimacy, and gender and sexual identity. But insofar as language has the means for subjects to secure it to context, it also provides a location and the means for social agents to uncouple these indexical attachments of gender. Because a fundamental indexical nonsense form under-girds gender sense, every site where a speaking subject secures gender to a social context also provides a site where another speaking subject can contest the linkage. Countless studies in language and gender have now documented the diversity in semiotic form, content, and mediation of these struggles.

To become a gendered subject in language is, then, to entail a context for the subject of language and the conditions in which that subject will *suffer*. This subject will suffer for purely linguistic reasons. Semantic, pragmatic, and metapragmatic features and functions and the social agents who mediate them regiment the presuppositional conditions of the *proper* gendered subject. But these regimentations of normative gender and sexuality are also always subject to modification, question, interrogation, and accusation based on these same features, functions, institutions, and agents. Language may denote and predicate gender but it also provides the ever-present means of its insecurity and indetermination. But this subject of language will also suffer on account of language. Doomed to be *actual* only through language, the subject will be forced to enunciate herself as a full and truly human subject in a communicative medium

³² See MacKinnon (1993); Butler (1997).

necessarily partial and particularizing. The subject will be forced to engage a social language with an intimate pragmatics that irritates and is irritated by that social language. Thus, to speak like a proper woman may be to become a proper woman. But if so, to be a woman is strictly impossible. But no more or less so than a man who, for all the indexically obviousness of his Thing, suffers the fact and security of its pragmatic attachment.