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Agency

The term *agency* appears often in academic writing these days, but what scholars mean by it can differ considerably from common usages of the word. When I did a keyword search in our university library catalogue for *agency*, for example, the system returned with 24,728 matches. (And that's just books, not articles.) Among these were books about travel agencies, the Central Intelligence Agency, social service agencies, collection agencies, the International Atomic Energy Agency, and the European Space Agency. Few, if any, of these books use *agency* in the way scholars do: as a way to talk about *the human capacity to act*. In fact, ironically enough, the commonsense notion of the term in English often connotes a *lack* of what scholars would call *agency* because the everyday definition of *agent* involves acting on behalf of someone else, not oneself.

The concept of *agency* gained currency in the late 1970s as scholars across many disciplines reacted against structuralism's failure to take into account the actions of individuals. Inspired by activists who challenged existing power structures in order to achieve racial and gender equality, some academics sought to develop new theories that would do justice to the potential effects of human action. Feminist theorists in particular analyzed the ways in which "the personal" is always political—in other words, how people's actions influence, and are influenced by, larger social and political structures. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, sociologist Anthony Giddens first popularized the term *agency* and, along with anthropologists such as Pierre Bourdieu and Marshall Sahlins, focused on the ways in which human actions are dialectically related to social structure in a mutually constitutive manner. These scholars, in addition to cultural Marxists such as Raymond Williams, noted that human beings make society even as society makes them. This loosely defined school of thought has been called "practice theory" by Sherry Ortner, a theorist who has herself carried forward this program of study. The riddle that practice theorists seek to solve is how social

reproduction becomes social transformation—and they believe agency is the key.

Note that agency in these formulations is not synonymous with free will. Rather, practice theorists recognize that actions are always already socially, culturally, and linguistically constrained. Agency is emergent in sociocultural and linguistic practices. Furthermore, although some scholars use *agency* as a synonym for resistance, most practice theorists maintain that agentive acts may also involve complicity with, accommodation to, or reinforcement of the status quo—sometimes all at the same time.

Scholars who use the term *agency* must consider several important issues. Can agency only be the property of an individual? What types of supra-individual agency might exist? The field is wide open for theorists to explore and distinguish among various types of institutional and collective agency exercised by entities such as states, corporations, anthropology faculties, unions, lineages, families, or couples. Similarly, we might also be able to talk about agency at the sub-individual level (or the “dividual,” as McKim Marriott, E. Valentine Daniel, Bonnie McElhinny, and others call it), thereby shedding light on things like internal dialogues and fragmented subjectivities. The level of analysis appropriate for scholars interested in agency should not automatically be considered to be the individual, since such a tight focus on individual agency is likely to render invisible larger social structures such as gender, race, and class that shape possibilities for, and types of, agency. Scholars analyzing agency must also decide whether agency can act below the level of awareness. What sorts of actions are truly “agentive” (or “agentic” or “agential”)? Must an act be fully, consciously intentional in order to be agentive? How could a scholar ever know?

Another avenue for potential research involves investigating theories of agency that people in other cultures or speech communities might espouse. In my own work I have analyzed Nepali marriage narratives and love letters in order to ascertain how people in other societies interpret actions and assign responsibility for events—by blaming or crediting others, by attributing the events to fate, or by naming a supernatural force. Instead of attempting to locate, label, and measure agency, I try to discover how people in other societies conceptualize it. Who do they believe can exercise agency? Do they view it as differentially or hierarchically distributed somehow?

Linguistic anthropologists are well situated to contribute to the scholarship on agency. Recognizing that language shapes individuals’ thought categories even as it enables them at times to transcend those categories, linguistic anthropologists interested in agency examine specific speech events in order to illuminate how people think about their own and others’ actions. Because language *is* social action, studies of language use (such as can be found, for example, in Dennis Tedlock and Bruce Mannheim’s recent edited volume) reveal how culture in all its forms emerges dialogically from everyday linguistic interactions that are themselves shaped by sociocultural formations.

The work of Alessandro Duranti exemplifies how attention to language can shed light on human agency. Duranti looks at the attribution of agency in Western Samoa by examining what is known as an ergative marker—

a grammatical form found in some languages in which the subjects of transitive verbs and intransitive verbs are encoded differently. Duranti maintains that the Samoans' use of ergative markers reveals how they attribute agency, especially in cases of praise or blame. Powerful individuals are more likely to use the ergative marker when they want to accuse someone of a malicious act, whereas less-powerful individuals try to resist such accusations by suggesting alternative linguistic definitions of events. Thus Duranti's "grammar of praising and blaming" demonstrates how agency is embedded in and shaped by the linguistic forms that a speaker uses.

Researchers need not look only at ergative markers and transitive or intransitive verbs for evidence of how agency is exercised through language. Analyzing other linguistic features such as pronoun use, turn-taking, overlapping discourse, or the narrative structure of stories can be extremely instructive. Linguistic anthropologists working in the field of language and gender have made especially important contributions to the study of human agency by investigating the multifunctionality of specific linguistic features and by demonstrating how human actions and words shape and are shaped by gendered social structures.

Whichever aspects of agency researchers pursue, it is crucial that scholars interested in agency consider the assumptions about personhood, desire, and intentionality that are built into their analyses. Some studies of agency reinforce received notions about Western atomic individualism, while others deny agency to individuals, attributing it instead only to discourses or social forces. No matter how agency is defined, implications for social theory abound. Scholars using the term must define it clearly, both for themselves and for their readers. This is where linguistic anthropology, with its focus on concrete interactions, can provide guidance as scholars attempt to understand the micro- and macro-processes of social life.

(See also *body, gender, narrative, turn*)

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