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ARTICLE

The Political Uses of Semiotic Indeterminacy

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Abstract
The authors in this collection start with the insight that not all instances of semiotic indeterminacy are produced in the same way, that they can be located differently in the process of semiosis, and this fact shapes how and when semiotic indeterminacy is deployed by formulators and interpreters. The authors explore patterned uses of semiotic indeterminacy in Brazil, Bulgaria, Iran, and the United States to examine the role indeterminacy plays in institutional attempts at control and persuasion.

Keywords: authoritative discourse; bureaucracy; capitalism; contextualization; cultural semiotics; standardization

When people are trying to control how others interact, semiotic indeterminacy can become relevant, and often relevant in patterned ways. Sometimes the relationship between semiotic token and referent is underdetermined. Sometimes semiotic tokens are ambiguous in different ways for all involved, different participants may not share the same perspective on that particular instance of semiotic indeterminacy. Sometimes signs are denotationally anchored for some in a given context, and not for others—there may be a disagreement about whether indeterminacy is even at play. Sometimes the interpretants' role is underdetermined, and the semiotic indeterminacy springs from the emergent participant structure. In short, not all instances of semiotic indeterminacy are produced in the same way—which raises the question motivating this special issue: what are the consequences of using a particular form of semiotic indeterminacy—what political strategies does this form enable and what does it foreclose?

Because indeterminacy can be located differently in the process of semiosis, this shapes how and when formulators and interpreters make use of semiotic indeterminacy. For example, as Susan Gal describes in the case of grafting (Gal 2018), people will bring linguistic or social practices imbued with authority in one arena into another arena, and doing so in ways that allow them to extend this already established authority into this new arena. Grafting thus becomes a resource for formulators, and available for a range of uses, but is not the only patterned use of indeterminacy, as Bonnie

Urciuoli demonstrates in her article on strategically deployed shifters. While from an analytical perspective, semiotic indeterminacy is ever present, much of the scholarly attention to indeterminacy has been to focus on how standardization, regularization, and truth-seeking attempt to minimize indeterminacy (Hoffman-Dilloway 2008; Jaffe 2009; Falk-Moore 1978; Timmermans 2017; see also Alexander and Sanchez 2018 for an approach to indeterminacy that focuses more on classificatory failures). Most authors in this volume, instead, take up a patterned way that semiotic indeterminacy was used politically in their ethnographic sites, exploring how indeterminacy is central to how control is expressed and experienced.

For linguistic anthropologists, beginning with Jakobson and Silverstein, making meaning is fundamentally an indexical act, tied to how people connect utterances with context (Silverstein 1976). Because of how indexicality is produced through ties to context, instability and ambiguity underlies all indexical processes. There is always at least a little bit of effort to integrate utterance and context (for an overview, see Urciuoli, this volume). This labor is why indeterminacy accompanies every utterance.

This is not the only reason indeterminacy is ever-present in some form or another in all moments of communication. As Sally Falk-Moore pointed out as early as 1978, because social interactions take place within heterogenous and partial social fields, indeterminacy is at the core of these interactions. Participants have varied historical trajectories, which ensure that their utterances may presuppose a potentially wide range of indexical associations, and participants will attempt to foreground only one or a few of these associations, often mindful of others' historically grounded and varied uptakes (Agha 2005). In her article "Indeterminacy and Regularization," Jaffe summarizes the many ways in which heterogenous participants and interactions guarantee an ever-present indeterminacy because: "Meanings accrue to linguistic variables from diverse domains of practice; thus a given variable may have multiple and layered meanings that may be fundamentally ambiguous and may not necessarily be coherent" (Jaffe 2009, 234). For example, in Jaffe's fieldsite in Corsica, older people often use the Corsican language with family and close friends because it has indexical associations of intimacy and solidarity, in contrast to French, which indexes political hierarchies and social interactions with strangers. Yet, they also speak French in their intimate interactions with younger Corsicans. Thus, older Corsicans experience indexical associations of intimacy with Corsican (as opposed to French), *and* with French—the associations are not stable across contexts (Jaffe 2009, 234–35). Yet it is not only indexicality whose historical mooring among multiple participants create indeterminacy. Social orders, utterances, identities, and participants' roles are all heterogenous, and enough so that indeterminacy is ever present, and regularity or repetition is an achievement in the face of such indeterminacy (Bakhtin 1981; Falk-Moore 1978; Gershon 2019; Irvine 1996; Woolard 999; Wortham 2005). From an analyst's perspective, one can see foregrounding or backgrounding part of the communicative repertoire as part of the essential building blocks of agency, with the caution that one's fieldwork interlocutors may have a very different conception of agency.

Linguistic anthropologists have generally attended to indeterminacy by observing how people try to suppress it when they try to standardize or regularize communication. As Erika Hoffman-Dilloway points out, many language standardization efforts

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are in fact attempts to manage the indeterminacy produced through heterogeneity. "… language standardization projects work to reduce variation not only in the formal properties of language but also in the wider semiotic interpretations of those forms" (Hoffman-Dilloway 2008, 193; see also Jaffe 2009; Woolard 999). For the most part, modern forms of expertise, especially when framed as mastery in a language or register, are also part and parcel of efforts to standardize meaning and reduce ambiguity.

A few scholars have shown that those in power will sometimes embrace indeterminacy rather than try to resolve it (Carr 2021; Hodge 2019; Mertz 1996, 2007). In Beth Mertz's ethnography of U.S. law school classes, law professors utilize a hermeneutic practice—reading cases like a lawyer—that relies on rejecting referential interpretation in favor of a commitment to the legal indeterminacy at the heart of precedent (Mertz 1996). In law schools, first-year contracts classes often focus on cases in appellate courts, in which contesting legal framings and invoking legal precedents are far more important than the facts of the case. Law professors are teaching hermeneutic techniques that rely on engaging with earlier legal decisions "like a lawyer," revealing the heterogeneity of the legal issues that might be at play, as well as the range of facts that could potentially be relevant. "The transition to a new legal reading pulls students away from referentialist approaches, which treat the text as transparent and view its core meaning as its referential content. Instead, here the text is understood as a repository of power, whose core meaning centers on legal-textual authority" (Mertz 2007, 94).

In a more recent discussion, Adam Hodge explores linguistic strategies employed by Trump and other Republican politicians in the United States, which call upon an inverse relationship with referentiality and indeterminacy to be authoritative (Hodge 2019). He focuses on how they turn to plausible deniability, which "allows speakers to avoid taking responsibility for a controversial utterance by invoking possible counter-interpretations" (Hodge 2019, 137). Trump might do this by reflecting on one of his speeches that journalists describe as offensive, and selectively ignoring some of what he said and highlighting his other statements. In order to produce plausible deniability, Trump and his supporters insist on a narrow understanding of how words refer and, in the process, denying co-textual signals as well as contextually derived cues. Trump and his supporters will reflect back upon what Trump has recently said in response to media criticism. When doing so, they insist on as acontextual an interpretation as possible of the sentence or phrase they choose to repeat. Not only is the author's intention taken to be the final say in how utterances should be interpreted, but most, if not all, contextual inferences are dismissed as irrelevant or misleading.

In a similar vein, the authors in this volume build upon a longstanding engagement with semiotic indeterminacy in linguistic anthropology and the philosophy of language but focus more tightly on the patterned ways that their fieldwork interlocutors make strategic use of such indeterminacy to persuade or exert control, rather than attempting to lessen indeterminacy. The authors are also less concerned with establishing when and where semiotic indeterminacy can be located from the perspective of an analyst and far more with how and when indeterminacy becomes a political resource. Since these patterned forms of indeterminacy might occur in a wide variety of cultural contexts, different aspects of indeterminacy can be political resources. That is, like a

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media channel, the form of the semiotic indeterminacy at play may limit its potential uses but is still flexible enough that participants' language ideologies and cultural perspectives strongly affect how social interactions that hinge upon indeterminacy will unfold.

Bonnie Urciuoli's article delineates what a strategically deployed shifter is, addressing how participants at a US small liberal arts college use the indexical associations underpinning shifters to establish a hegemonic enough approach to diversity. Indexical processes underlie the semiotic indeterminacy at the heart of a strategically deployed shifter, largely because, as Asif Agha argues, "referring is an unavoidably 'social' act" (Agha 2007, 84). As Urciuoli explains in her article in this volume: "Indeterminacy is wired into reference because what people understand as reference (and as other modes of meaning) is context-bound, tied to the processes by which it is produced." Yet when strategically deployed shifters are used, participants may have different enough understandings of a semiotic token that what, say, skills means for one person is quite distinct from what it means for another. The strategically deployed shifter is like a half-full glass, full enough of shared meaning so that everyone can interact as if they know what the shifter refers to, but empty enough of agreed upon meaning so that it is possible to generate substantive miscommunication and misapprehension (see also Nevins 2010).

Often participants tacitly agree not to openly engage with the referential disagreements that accompany the strategically deployed shifter. Strategically deployed shifters often emerge in social orders in which people explicitly anticipate the demands of other social orders and are constantly attuned to status. Urciuoli's fieldsite was an especially fruitful site, since modern US college administrations are focused on forms of valuation generated by adjacent social orders that putatively measure how well prepared students are for future jobs. As she points out, when organizations are validated by other institutional "spheres of greater power and status," this leads to "discourse deeply saturated by power, positioning, and profit, where discourse routinely functions to reinforce alliances and build allegiances" (Urciuoli, this volume). In contexts in which hegemonic framings are shifting, the ambiguity of strategically deployed shifters can become useful semiotic pathways to introduce new framings—neoliberal framings in Urciuoli's case—which can become taken for granted when they are repeated frequently by institutionally powerful participants.

Building on Urciuoli's discussion of the strategically deployed shifter, Larson and Wolfgram turn to the internship, a participant role now ubiquitous in US higher education institutions and workplaces, and one which is underdetermined enough in its legal and workplace categorization to function as the role equivalent of a strategically deployed shifter. Yet what happens when it is a role instead of a shifter that is indeterminant? Larson and Wolfgram point out that creating such an ambiguous classification demands a significant amount of semiotic labor and novel legal and economic systems that can maintain such a poorly delineated category along just the right lines. At the same time, because it is a role and not a semiotic token, when people are faced with being an intern, they as participants are able to expend their strategic efforts on entering and exiting this ambiguous role. College students may strive to become interns—or choose to quit when being an intern proves unsatisfying. People can't quit or easily refuse strategically deployed shifters such as diversity. In general, internship's

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hegemonic force revolves more around its potential contribution to gatekeeping in a labor market. Learning to navigate this ambiguity trains interns to later compromise in the labor market, since they also need to be ready to provide free labor with no clearcut promise of career advancement after they graduate from college.

While Urciuoli and Larson and Wolfgram focus on how people navigating the demands of a neoliberal political economy will turn to patterned engagements with semiotic indeterminacy, the other four articles in this volume focus on the dilemmas semiotic indeterminacy pose to classic liberal governance. Weichselbraun explores how a patterned engagement with indeterminacy lies at the heart of bureaucratic transparency through an analysis of the international security community's oft-repeated suspicion that Iran is developing nuclear weapons. She observes that Iran is unable to ever fully quell suspicions that it is arming itself with nuclear missiles, just as other countries on the margins of the geopolitical order will also become caught by uncertainty and skepticism, regardless of what government officials do or say. While Iranian officials may sign treaties agreeing not to develop weapons, this is not enough for international institutions to be satisfied. International Atomic Energy Agency's safeguards inspectors introduce material signs, such as tamper-indicating seals, to produce transparency, a transparency that inevitably fails. When these material forms fail to reassure, the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) begins to attempt to determine Iran's intentions, calling up a hermeneutical approach that resonates all too strongly with Protestant approaches to sincerity and belief. Yet this is unsuccessful for many reasons, not least of which is that a nation-state's sincerity is even more impossible to ascertain than a person's through this hermeneutic lens. This is especially the case when that nation is, for other geopolitical reasons, kept out of the other economic and political exchanges that less marginalized countries enter into. This creates inequities of trust because the countries which are part of these other exchanges will seem more reliable when they make claims that they don't have nuclear weapons. Weichselbraun traces how indeterminacy is coupled with the ideals of transparency and sincerity throughout the verification process, and yet at each stage of the process, both indeterminacy and transparency are located differently and engaged with through predictably shifting and contradictory hermeneutic lenses.

In analyzing liberal governance, both Hartikainen and Resnick find Susan Gal's discussion of grafting helpful in analyzing how people can turn to semiotic indeterminacy to justify racist violence. Resnick addresses how far-right Bulgarians insist that the swastika is an underdetermined sign, condensing the sign's heterogenous historical trajectories to publicly disavow its Nazi connotations, while their practices reinforce its racist roots. These far-right activists are insisting that it is not clear what the type is in the type-token relationship when a swastika painted near a Roma community center is the token. They insist its persuasiveness is grafted from perhaps other types such as "ancient Bulgarian symbolism or Buddhist iconography" (Resnick, this volume). The dual addressivity at play in these moments is distinctive in its contradictions. Members of the counterpublic being addressed by the sign are expected to be encouraged by the Nazi indexical associations but deny it when engaging with anyone openly rejecting that counterpublic's world-making aims. Meanwhile, those who disavow the counterpublic's aspirations still

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are asked to openly accept the denial of a racist fascism while also implicitly fearing it.

Turning to a different use of grafting, Hartikainen discusses how evangelical Christians in Brazil condemn Afro-Brazilian religious practitioners as possessed by demons, using the semiotic indeterminacy at the core of the strategically deployed shifter, "religious intolerance" to insist others are discriminating against them. This is only possible, Hartikainen argues, because liberalism requires that religion be a semiotically indeterminate category in its attempts to create a divide between religion and secularism that furthers a liberal governmentality (Sullivan 2005). "In religiously plural contexts, secularism both produces and relies on a set of semiotic indeterminacies" (Hartikainen, this volume). In Brazil during the early 2000s, government officials introduced religious intolerance purposely to be a strategically deployed shifter intended to protect Afro-Brazilian spiritual practices, and similar polytheistic practices, that were under attack from evangelicals. Yet in doing so, they very much wanted religion to be a capacious category, one that was defined in large measure by its contrast to a liberal secularism (Agrama 2012; Asad 2003). Evangelical Christians responded to this critique by turning the tables, insisting that it wasn't they who were religiously intolerant, but the people who condemned them for invoking Christianity while they (sometimes violently) rejected the gods that Afro-Brazilians believed in. They claimed they were the victims of religious intolerance, in practice grafting a term resonant with secular authority, and invoking it to claim a perceived religious persecution.

In many special issues or edited volumes, there will be one article that examines the obverse (admittedly typically not the editor's own article). In my article co-authored with Josh Babcock and Amy Cohen, instead of focusing on semiotic indeterminacy, we explore a language ideology centered on semiotic determinacy promulgated by an international movement of loosely affiliated right-leaning activists who fetishize national laws. Sovereign citizens in countries such as Australia, Canada, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States use a semiotically determinate language ideology when faced with police or officers of the court. They insist on the legal system they believe should be in place, instead of the one that they are encountering. "… for sovereign citizens, some of the labor of fashioning an otherwise occurs through fairly radical alternative linguistic legal practices (see Bauman 1983 for a similar example among early Quakers), most of which tend to dismay institutionally sanctioned legal practitioners and so far has led to failure in the courts" (Babcock, Cohen, and Gershon, this volume). In choosing to commit to a fairly radical faith in linguistic determinacy to reject contemporary courts' authority, they part ways with US constitutional originalists, whose engagement with adjudication can lead to substantively different hermeneutic concerns. Sovereign citizens' assumptions about language and law enable them to use prefigurative legal strategies to call forth their desired legal and political orders, which, in the case of the United States, is a classical liberal vision valorizing, for most of these groups, the Constitution prior to the amendments introduced after the Civil War.

We live, yet again, in a moment in which gaslighting can be a common accusation, with much discussion of misinformation, conspiracy theories, and propaganda. In short, questions of how reference can be effectively established, or denied, are becoming increasingly politically salient. It is not surprising that linguistic anthropologists are

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increasingly beginning to ask about the patterned forms of indeterminacy people use to control others, or to undercut that control. The authors in this volume are continuing to expand on this line of inquiry, hoping to inspire others to identify yet more such patterned uses, and, ideally, trace the consequences and possibilities for countering these techniques as well.

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