

## **At the threshold and limit of language**

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Linguistic anthropology is a field defined by its disciplinary liminality. Historically and intellectually located within/between anthropology and linguistics, the fuzzy, shifting boundaries of our subdiscipline have historically been demarcated by a set of ambivalent engagements with those analytic objects – “language” and “culture” – that anchor our encompassing/border disciplines. Arguing simultaneously against accounts of the social and cultural that do not account for processes of discursive mediation and accounts of language that do not account for social and cultural context, the field has generated a powerful, ethnographically driven account of semiosis whose analytic terms (indexicality, enregisterment, ideology, stance, etc.) are non-medium specific (i.e., not particular to “language”). Two important results of this are, first, the critical explication of language precisely through a deconstruction of it (e.g., by pointing out the non-linguistic processes and relations that are central to its form and function) and, second, the expansion of the object of linguistic anthropological study far beyond language (e.g., to include media of many types).

In this panel, we reflect on the curious role that “language” has played in linguistic anthropology through an investigation of range of empirical cases at the threshold and limit of the linguistic: glossolalia, animal-assisted therapy, asemic writing in modern art and “new writing,” the emergence of tactile sign language, and the cinematic transformation of “dialects” into “languages.” Each such case unsettles language; empirically, by focusing on semiotic practices at the threshold and limit between language and non-language; theoretically, by interrogating the utility of the concept of “language” as analytic device and disciplinary touchstone. If, in unsettling language, we are to think language continually differently, how does doing so require us to rethink and unsettle what linguistic anthropology itself is and could be?

**Keywords:** linguistic anthropology, semiotics, politics, language

## 1. Inventing glossolalia

*Dr. Nicholas Harkness  
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The word “glossolalia” is a modern linguistic invention. It appeared in print in early 19th Century Germany as die Glossolalie in connection with exegetical debates among Protestant theologians over the New Testament Greek phrase glossais lalein (tongues) lalein (to speak). Until the late 18th Century, the accepted view had been that glossais lalein (1 Corinthians 14) referred to speaking in a foreign language. By the 1820s and 30s, competing hypotheses were suggesting alternative interpretations, in particular that the phrase described an indistinct babbling with the anatomical organ of speech, i.e., quite literally the tongue, or that it was best translated as speaking in “glosses” (die Glossen), uncommon or strange utterances requiring interpretation. Using theological publications from the late 18th and early 19th Centuries as sociolinguistic data, this paper reconstructs the invention of die Glossolalie in 19th Century Germany, where Protestant theology was increasingly being conceptualized and methodologized as a science. The meta-linguistic irony of glossolalia’s coinage was that the pursuit of the true denotation of glossais lalein in the New Testament depended on whether glossais lalein denoted vocalizations that were, themselves, denotational. Within this irony lies an answer to how language-specific morphological factors and historically specific intellectual projects yielded the particular Greek-derived lexical shape, “die Glossolalie,” which allowed biblical scholars to develop theological conceptualizations and hermeneutical justifications for speech behavior that approached the ideological limits of what, for them, counted as language. This historical reconstruction speaks to fundamental problems and first principles in the empirical study and theorization of speech, namely the lexicalization of analytical concepts, the place of denotation in method and theory, and the status of language as a scientific object.

**Keywords:** glossolalia, linguistic anthropology, metalinguistics, language ideology

## 2. Canine, culture, communication

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Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT) is exploding in North America, with organizations devoted to training and deploying animals as interventionists struggling to keep up with increasing demand. American dogs—an iconic therapy animal—are being put to work in VA hospitals to soothe the symptoms of PTSD, in primary school classrooms and libraries where they teach children with learning disabilities to read, and in cancer wards where reportedly they lower blood pressure, and relieve pain. Across these professional sites, AAT advocates point to and invest in the extraordinary, even “magical,” communicative capacities of animals to “speak to” the most intense individual suffering and intractable social problems and in ways that humans—even those humans trained and experienced in these fields—cannot. And so: to the extent that animal-assisted therapy is exploding, so too is the idea that language is the superior mode of communication. Though the capacities of Standard American English have always had its native critics, AAT highlights long-standing cultural doubts that language is particularly ill-equipped to detect, mediate, and ameliorate human suffering. Drawing on preliminary fieldwork, this paper explores the relationship of therapy dogs who communicate with clients, despite their linguistic incapacity, and the erasure of the human labor involved in these acts of therapeutic communication. More generally, I raise the question of what sorts of (non)linguistic semiotic processes are involved in the presumably non-linguistic co-presencing of the dog therapist and the human client.

**Keywords:** animal communication, language ideology, linguistic anthropology

### 3. Being for speaking: A plunge into the hoary recesses of the Origo

*Dr. Terra Edwards  
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Scholars interested in language and thought have argued that our thoughts are prospectively oriented toward acts of speaking—a process known as “thinking for speaking”. Drawing on more than a decade of anthropological and linguistic research in DeafBlind communities, I argue that “protactile” DeafBlind people seek out ways of being, which will give them something to speak about. At the center of this process is an emergent tactile deictic system. In order to use the system to ask a DeafBlind person, for example, “Should we sit there or there?”, I must (a) know the form conventionally associated with the concept ‘there’, along with the semantic field from which its value is retrieved; (b) be able to be here in much the same way you are; and (c) identify a pathway or relation from here to there for us. While something like this is required for anyone speaking deictically, conditions of radical sensory difference highlight the fact that we must commit to being one way or another before we can refer to, or talk about, anything at all. In other words, modes of being are prospectively oriented to acts of speaking—hence: “being for speaking”. After a quick sketch of the protactile deictic system, the paper plunges headlong into what Constantine Nakassis has called “the hoary recesses of the origo,” to ask: What minimum threshold of being, existence, or residence is required for a person to become a “speaker?” I conclude by arguing that this threshold is where new languages emerge.

**Keywords:** sign language, deafblind, deixis, phenomenology, linguistic anthropology

#### **4. Sounding like a dialect, looking like a language: The aesthetic center (and linguistic limits) of Bhojpuri**

*Dr. Kathryn Hardy  
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In this paper, I consider the interrelations between “Bhojpuri language,” and “Bhojpuri film,” mutually consolidated over the past fifteen years. Filmmakers claim Bhojpuri as a pre-existing set of rural speech forms that can be exploited to capture a rural and migrant audience abandoned by mainstream Hindi filmmakers. The divide between Hindi and Bhojpuri is understood among film professionals as essentially a linguistic one, predicated on the separability of “Bhojpuri” as a rural dialect of “Hindi.” But as “Bhojpuri” (considered as both language and eponymous media form) is consolidated, its most striking feature might be its linguistic indeterminacy. Filmmakers strive to produce media that is widely intelligible, hewing to standard Hindi in dialogue, but also work to define the essential difference of Bhojpuri from Hindi in terms of rural or raunchy audiovisual aesthetics. Bhojpuri media consolidates a distinctly Bhojpuri feel but is, linguistically, what Kathryn Woolard (1999) calls “bivalent”: interpretable as either Hindi or Bhojpuri, morphosyntactically undecidable. Moments of ambiguity help clarify how Bhojpuri (the language) and Bhojpuri (the mass mediated aesthetic) are not just accidentally, but foundationally, entwined. For instance, the 1982 Hindi film *Nadiya ke Paar* is recruited as a classic example of the golden age of Bhojpuri film history, despite being officially in Hindi. In a 2010 controversy around the origins of the hit Hindi film song “Munni Badnaam Hui,” journalists repeatedly referred to a song in grammatical Hindi as a “Bhojpuri folk song.” Finally, certain films in Bhojpuri are rejected by industry gatekeepers for not being “Bhojpuri” enough – that is, for not upholding the aesthetic standards of Bhojpuri media. Rather than read these incidents as misrecognition and the films as transgressive, I argue that they demonstrate the unstable boundaries not just between Hindi and Bhojpuri, between dialect and language, but between language and non-language.

**Keywords:** Bhojpuri, Hindi, dialect, cinema, language ideology, linguistic anthropology

## 5. Authority in multimodal texts: 'New writing' and text-based art

*Dr. Adam Jaworski*  
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The conflation of the written and graphic modes in single texts in such genres as technical manuals, PowerPoint presentations, webpages, etc., has been dubbed 'new writing' (van Leeuwen, 2008) or 'integrated design' (Ledin and Machin, 2018). New writing combines written script, icons and graphics to create textual cohesion visually by tying up words, usually nouns and noun clusters, rather than sentences, through the use of visual aids (e.g. arrows), colour, layout, alignment, typography, and so on. This stands in contrast to more traditional forms of writing, namely the running text, in which coherence principally depends on verbal syntax and rhetorical organization. In this paper, I draw parallels between new writing and what I consider some of its precedents in modern and contemporary text-based art: Apollinaire's 'calligrams', Cubist papiers collés, Dada and Futurist collages, Conceptual Art, and Cy Twombly's asemic writing. Both types of multimodal texts (new writing and text-based art) appear to share some formal features. However, I suggest that they are underpinned by diverse language ideological orientations, hence pragmatic effects. Following Gal and Woolard's (2001) and Woolard's (2016) work on linguistic authority and the ideologies of anonymity and authenticity, I argue that new writing, such as performance management graphs and diagrams (Ledin and Machin, 2016), build their authority on the anonymous, standardized templates of their software (Djonov and van Leeuwen, 2014). On the other hand, in text-based art, the origins of language tend not to be anonymous; the visual semiotic choices are usually linked and attributable to individual artists, traceable to specific artistic traditions, or to some other, non-artistic sources, through a chain of intertextual and creative processes, or recontextualizations. However, veering away from narration, these texts knowingly and explicitly unsettle, subvert, challenge and break from the constraints of ideologies of standard, monoglot, monomodal, and denotationally transparent language.

**Keywords:** writing, art, language ideology, authenticity

**Discussant:**

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