

The Linguistic Turn and Generative Literacy

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Abstract:

This essay argues that only generative anthropology can complete the “linguistic turn” that has dominated much of 20th century thought. Completing the linguistic turn is essential because the metalanguages of humanism and metaphysics obscure the forms of authority needed to ensure intelligent participation in institutions and hierarchical orders. The need to accept a “given” centrality in order to clarify authoritative orders is the reason why victimary anti-metaphysical discourses could only generate resentment towards, but not transcend, metaphysics. Generative anthropology, meanwhile, not only accepts the givenness of the center, but sees the center as the guarantee of meaning and human order. Replacing metalanguages with “infralanguages” enables us to remain aware of ourselves as beings within language as a way of clarifying our reciprocal relations to each other.

Keywords: generative anthropology; linguistic turn; infralanguage; metalanguage; inscription; natural semantic primes; metaphysics; the center

I’m going to begin with the assumption that the linguistic turn entails the rejection of any attempt to find legitimation for what we say in language in some reality taken to be outside of language, whether this outside be truth, nature, human nature, reality, any form of interiority, the greater good, or anything else. This means that language, rather than being primarily representational, that is, trying to provide an adequate and therefore legitimating picture of what is outside of language, is generative—that is, it is relationships intrinsic to representational structures that create what we call truth, reality, nature, the good and so on.

To say that language is generative is to say that the meanings of signs are to be found in their effects on other signs, not in reference to reality: the main question, then, becomes, what are the levers or mechanisms within sign systems that make such effects possible? To put it in pragmatic terms, to take the example of argumentation, instead of trying to prove that your discourse represents reality better, the question is how to enter existing discourses in such a way as to modify and eventually become them.

Anna Wierzbicka's discussion of modern English in her *Experience, Evidence and Sense: The Cultural Legacy of English* (2010) provides us with an example of what entering and inhabiting existing discourses means: she shows how the entire language was transformed as a result of one intervention: Locke's theory of knowledge and politics. She traces a whole series of terms, such as "experience," "evidence," "empirical," "sense," and others back to Locke's usages,[\[1\]](#) and points out not only the historical contingency and cultural specificity of these terms, but that these are among the very words English speakers take to be most universal and commonsensical. It's no coincidence that these are the words with which we take ourselves to be describing our access to what lies outside of language. It lies outside of Wierzbicka's inquiry to explain how these words operated generatively upon the English language, but I would suggest that raising and answering that kind of question is, in the wake of the linguistic turn, central to any aesthetic, moral, ethical or political inquiry. It may very well be all such an inquiry entails.

The generativity of language, at least in the post-structuralist forms given it by Derrida's claim that there is no outside of the text or Rorty's (1979) injunction to "keep the conversation going" (378), is generally taken to be a pluralist doctrine in which the difference inhabiting the sign is irreducible. But the sign that constitutes the originary scene is absolutely generative, insofar as the sign creates the scene and the human, while at the same time presupposing complete unanimity. And, in fact, I think that the linguistic turn, understood through originary thinking, poses a very different kind of problem, to which we can, in fact, reduce all human problems: that of ensuring that all participants on a scene issue, and know themselves to be issuing, the same sign. This is a problem because it never really is the same sign (the linguistic turners are right about that)—since signs only take on meaning within a scene, a sign on one scene cannot be identical to a sign on another scene, no matter what measures we take or what rules we construct to ensure the sign will be recognized as identical—indeed, we take such measures and construct such rules precisely because there is no internal essence of the sign (or some reality it presumably refers to) that makes it the same.

There are two ways in which the identity of the sign can be established. One, all participants on a scene can agree that the sign is the same according to some agreed upon criteria for identity—in other words, some metalanguage, which will then have to be grounded in a metaphysical reality outside of language. Or, we can establish the identity of the sign by deliberately and self-referentially constituting a scene upon which the sign directs us to some center. Here, we would embrace what Johanna Drucker (2013) calls "inscription," suggesting there is no sign without its embodiment and embedment in material and historical enactment. The problem with relying on metalanguage, or what Drucker (2013) calls "notation," of course, is that any metalanguage is subject to the same self-difference as the language it tries to control.

Language is going to be generative even if we act as if it is representational—pretensions to

a secure metalanguage really serve to guarantee a moral or political certainty that avoids the problem of creating in some space of language the shared attention directed towards some center. We can find the origin of this logocentrism in literacy. David Olson, in his *The World on Paper* (1994) and *The Mind on Paper* (2016), has shown that writing was created out of an inquiry into language, including the speech scenes upon which language is used. More recently, Olson has used the notion of classic prose (taken from Mark Turner and Francis Noël-Thomas's book, *Clear and Simple as the Truth*) to show that the telos of the metalanguage of literacy is to simulate a scene, modeled on a presumed original speech scene, upon which writer and readers are all present. It is for this purpose that the metalanguage of literacy establishes norms regarding the correctness of sentences and the uses of words—which is to say, it is literacy that enshrines the declarative sentence as the primary form of language—metaphysics is just further elaboration on this.

Insofar as we rely on notation and metalanguage, then, we imagine ourselves to be present on a simulated, always already constructed scene, with guarantees provided in advance that we all use the same sign. Definitions are established and logic is enforced—indeed, what is logic other than ensuring that, within a proposition, nothing in the definitions of the words predicated on the subject is inconsistent with the definition of the subject? (Determining what counts as “inconsistency” will in turn involve further definitional work.) We can then proceed to eliminate deviants—the ungrammatical, the illogical, the unclear—which further proves that those of us remaining are all in possession of the same sign. This metalinguistic imaginary elides the difference, constitutive of the declarative sentence, between the scene of utterance and the represented scene. Since the scene of writing and reading can be represented on that scene itself, introducing a difference within the scene, this elision generates anomalies within metalanguage.

These anomalies open the intrinsically imitative and therefore pedagogical dimension of language use that metaphysical presence occludes. This pedagogical dimension can only be enacted “infralinguistically,” to use Bruno Latour's (2007: 49) term. In place of the hierarchy between language and metalanguage we have the performance of the difference of the metalinguistically guaranteed sign through its representation until its event nature is elicited. These efforts aim at making visible and inescapable the event-character of the sign, which is to say the sign's inextricability from histories, traditions, the various ways in which it has been used by different groups in different situations and, above all, from some event, some act of deferral, some origin, the participation in which is the only the way we can reciprocally “authenticate” one another's use of the sign. What I have in mind here is using language from the scene itself to frame the scene, rather than invoking some metalanguage assumed to come from outside and be unaffected by the scene. Let's take, for example, a political scientist making an argument regarding the way new media have changed our understanding of “pluralism” in a liberal society: is that political scientist's address to his fellow political scientists, or whomever he takes his public to be, enacting the kind of pluralism his argument claims to be possible or necessary?

I have been implicitly suggesting an infralinguistic strategy or vocation for GA, whereby we speak and write in “originary” and “generative” English (or any other language). The basic concepts of GA, such as “desire,” “resentment,” “center” and others don’t really allow us to remain unimplicated in the objects of our analyses—on what basis could I claim to be unresentfully drawing the contours of another’s resentment? GA, then, despite its distinctive (if minimal) conceptual vocabulary, is ill-suited to be a metalanguage. I am asking, what kind of knowledge is GA? If it’s a new way of thinking, it’s a new relation to language. For starters, I’m contending that literacy is itself a second revelation, broadly parallel to the emergence of the Big Man—the revelation here being, as I pointed out before, the autonomy of the declarative sentence.

We can make further use of Olson to get a sense of what the implications of bringing this revelation to the fore as part of the linguistic turn might be. Olson (2016) points out that the metalanguage of literacy serves the purpose of “supplementing” the presumed scene of recorded speech with verbs referring implicitly to mental acts that would have been performed in a speech situation. If I say someone *assumed* something to be the case, I am reporting what another said, while also distancing myself from it—the other person was presumably more certain in speaking than I am in reporting his speech. In an oral setting, this would have been reflected in the tone—perhaps mildly mocking—in which the speech was reported; since we don’t have that tone, literacy introduces supplementary terms like “assume.” This allows for another innovation of literacy: the distinction between the meaning of an utterance, and the speaker’s meaning—we can now represent all kinds of ways in which the two can be at odds.

These verbs then get nominalized and we get new entities, like “assumptions,” and whole new disciplines organized so as to study them. All the human sciences are derived from such nominalizations, and much of everyday discourse (which has been transformed by literacy and the disciplines) as well. Even universally available words like “thoughts” and “ideas” are probably constructs of literacy. What this means is that there are vast domains of linguistic usage that are entirely dependent upon elaborations of the metalanguage of literacy, and also completely oblivious to this fact. We ourselves, within GA, are also thoroughly immersed in the metalanguage of literacy—the difference is, we can know it, and know why, and propose new disciplinary articulations that show such words to be scene- and event-dependent.

Working “inscriptively,” then, would involve accepting that writing is scenic itself, rather than an attempt to construct a universally shared and permanent speech scene. There is no single scene of writing—writing, rather, involves a dissemination of texts, each of which would serve to constitute a scene that might reference more or less directly any and all of the other scenes organized around the disseminated text. This means that writing generates samples of language, no more directly related to one particular scene upon which they are iterated than any other. Charles Sanders Peirce (Buchler 1955: 152, 326) argued that

knowledge is always of the relation between a sample and the population of which it is a sample. Once we abandon attempts to supplement the source, then, we have samples of language, and we generate hypotheses regarding their relation to language as a whole.

Treating pieces of language as samples involves creating anomalous uses, or, really, acknowledging that all uses are anomalous, and accordingly situating ourselves on the boundary between talking about something and no longer/not yet quite talking about something—"sampling" is a call, or imperative, to generate a new center with an object at it. If we're obeying the imperative derived from a concept, like, say, "infralanguage," or "inscription," then we are looking for samples of language serving as models of these concepts, and looking for ways to make sense of less obvious instances, even seeming counter-instances, in terms of these concepts—for example, noting the infralinguistic dimension inseparable from the most rigorously applied metalanguage.

Insofar as we have a new center, we want to derive all meaning from that center or, what comes to the same thing, that center calls upon us to affirm or name the world in its name: if we have a center we are using the same sign, and its identity is affirmed in the self-reference that situates one scene generated by the sign in a history of scenes with an origin that is continually marked. Imperatives from the previous scene, like "find new ways to talk about X," or "use the conceptual resources you have generated to replace some less differentiated way of saying something," generate the subsequent scenes. Words that bear with them histories distributed across self-referential networks are going to be more generative.

Metalinguistic terms resist operationalization—what, exactly, are we doing when we "assume" something? Are we always assuming what we assume? If not, what's the difference between when we're assuming and when we're not? The later Wittgenstein was fascinated and perhaps appalled by the evanescence of the "referents" of such metalinguistic terms.[\[2\]](#)

It is precisely such terms we can operationalize infralinguistically. If we make a study of "assumptions," it is not to define and categorize them or to leverage "hidden" assumptions against explicit statements, but, perhaps, to figure out when they come into view, and what kind of thinking is going on when they don't. Perhaps we can imagine "assumptionless" linguistic performances; or performances that are all assumptions, right there on the surface. The purpose here being to show that such imagining would require new forms of joint attention.

If language is the deferral of violence, the only thing we are ever talking about is how we are going about deferring violence. Forms of language that can be moved across scenes make it possible to defer not only immediate forms of violence but possible future forms, even ones that we can't yet imagine. In more critical discussions, where we're interested in

the “viability” of concepts, what we’re really inquiring into is how many possible uses for deferring violence a particular constellation of words might have. If we know this, but others don’t, in talking with others all we are doing is helping them to know this. This knowledge must lie in their own discourses, their own vocabulary—if they are going to speak GA with us they would first have to see that their own discourse is always already GA.

We’re all always and only talking about how we are deferring violence, but if we don’t all always know this it is because the sign can only refer to a single center, not centeredness in general. So, in entering others’ discourse we identify those signs where reference to a single center interferes with the reference to centeredness as such. This would transform the conversation into one centered on eliciting the distinction between centering and centeredness. This distinction is elicited by treating every utterance as both hypothesizing the way some other sign refers to a center and being, as a sample, a possible center. Our interest in that possible utterance, or sample, then, is in how it can be iterated and disseminated in ways that would make more explicit our talking about the way we are deferring violence.

It is this practice of sampling, taking pieces of language and pointing them at new centers, that makes language generative, memorable and effective. The linguistic turn entails a hypothesis: that the metaphysical scene of humanism, predicated upon the metalinguistics of literacy, has reached its limits as a means of deferring violence (or, perhaps, was never a source of deferral in the first place). But only the originary hypothesis enables us to complete the linguistic turn, because only originary thinking can be free of the victimary investments of those critiques of metaphysics that emerged alongside the anti-colonial revolts. This, in turn, opens up a difference within originary thinking. I would characterize the difference as follows: on one side, we can see the emergence of the modern marketplace as the source of more advanced forms of deferral that have marginalized if not eliminated the more evident and egregious forms of violence endemic to premodern hierarchies. On the other side, we can see the centralization of state power, its extension into increasingly minute spheres of life, and its destruction or subordination of intermediate forms of power as the means by which violence has been neutralized. In the first case, the means of maintaining and extending existing forms of deferral are clear: continue marketizing the social. In the second case, the question becomes one of facilitating orderly forms of centralization that don’t require the subversion of intermediate layers of authority, since the subversion of authorities from the nation-state to the local police is itself a cause of violence. In this latter case, disputing the market model is of critical importance, because belief in the spread of markets obfuscates the problem of central authority which, within the market model, can at best be seen as an instrument of marketization but is as likely to be seen as an obstacle to be weakened.

I see the “state centralization” model as more plausible than the “market” model, because the state centralization model can account for market relations (a central authority can

establish and regulate markets) while the converse is not the case: if the world is becoming increasingly marketized, why the massive growth of the state? Now, the relevance of this question to the “completion of the linguistic turn” is as follows. A completely marketized order is, as Eric Gans has pointed out, an “omnicentric” one.[\[3\]](#) In that case, one’s response to the emergence of new resentments or conflicts is to seek or create new centers. But any new center must draw upon the resources and authority of some existing center. At the very least, it must employ the linguistic reserves of existing centers. To acknowledge this explicitly is to repudiate omnicentrism, because reliance on an existing center implies reliance on a history and tradition of centers, among which some must have precedence over others. To refuse to acknowledge this dependence is to assert the spontaneity of the emergence of the new center. To the extent that the emergence of a new center is spontaneous, it is outside of history, tradition and authority. If omnicentrism and therefore spontaneity are to be defended, this outside needs to be “substantized.” This outside is the “target” of the metalinguistics of literacy: liberal political theory has designated this outside as “nature,” or “freedom,” or “natural right.” An omnicentric generative anthropology would call it “desire” and “resentment,” which, it must be assumed, are irreducible to existing forms of authority. But it is hard to deny that any particular form taken by desire and resentment will “mortgage” those emotions to some deployment of power within the existing forms of authority. That desires and resentments are constitutively socially leveraged can never be acknowledged by the market model. And this means that metalinguistic assertions of humanistic essentialism cannot be set aside.

Within the state centralization or, we could now say, “unicentric,” model, we are committed to fully embedding desires and resentments in their enacted and articulated social form. A particular desire or resentment situates one within a hierarchical order in which desire (to speak roughly) is a projection of some agenda produced by the center and resentment (to continue to speak roughly) is a response to some derogation of authority by the center. There is always some derogation of authority because authority can never be implemented perfectly (the center can never completely offer itself up), but the unicentric model allows us to posit an alternative response to the omnicentric spinning of a new center that must disguise its dependencies: improve the form of authority by making its terms more explicit and its operations more consistent. But in this case we have no need for metalanguage because authority is completely infralinguistic: the exercise of authority produces the frame within which all the references point back to the form of authority.

Omnicentrism, like metaphysics, must put the declarative form first, because the assertion of a spontaneously generated center must first of all repudiate some command or demand that has curtailed desire and generated resentment. The repudiation of the imperative is best effected by the declarative elevated to primacy over the imperative. For unicentrism, meanwhile, authority is first of all ostensive, then imperative, and only finally declarative (necessary for clarifying imperatives by directing them toward prospective ostensives). Before anything else, we are in a situation in which we are being asked to do

something—since the purpose of a metalanguage is to imagine ourselves outside of that or any situation (to pre-negotiate the terms on which we might freely and willingly enter some situation), acknowledging the situation and working out, along with others, its terms, precludes the need for any metalanguage. All we need to do is make the terms of authority more self-referential. This demands that we minimize our assumptions regarding what counts as a scene of knowing, and let the object, the “samples,” organize such scenes. The more generative discourses will be those that can create revelatory scenes of the origin and identity of the sign out of the greatest differentiation in sign use. It is the discourse that knows that all we’re ever doing is talking about how we’re deferring violence without it ever being possible to be completely explicit about that which will be the most generative one. This kind of work would be making the mimetic foundations of our practices more explicit while and by being more overtly mimetic: studying Shakespeare by making the scene of Shakespeare study “Shakespearean”; studying the resentment represented in melodrama with a kind of staged melodramatic resentment; studying the sociology of crowds through a rhetoric that stages one’s differentiation from encroaching crowds of students of crowds; studying bureaucratic attempts to neutralize violence by registering the violent effects of those attempts; teaching writing courses as studies in the discipline of composition—to suggest a few examples as food for thought.

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Notes

[1] Wierzbicka traces the specifically English notion of “experience” as a word referring to a process involving observation, self-observation and present feeling overwhelmingly to Locke’s usage:

The double prototype—Locke’s ‘see and feel’—ensures that, while Locke’s conception of *experience* was not retrospective . . . , it was not exclusively introspective either, but rather introspective and extrospective at the same time. The fact that Locke’s cultural descendants could use *experience* both in phrases like ‘varieties of religious experience’ and in statements like ‘science aims at understanding the world of experience’ is related to this terminological and conceptual equation between two varieties of knowledge—that based on the thought ‘this is happening to me now’ and that based on the thought ‘this is happening here now.’

When one compares Locke’s model of experience with that analyzed in section 2.3, one is struck, above all, by the similarities: Clearly the conception reflected in modern phrases like *a frightening experience* or *a weird experience* was built on the foundation of Lockean epistemology (53).

Wierzbicka does add that “there are noticeable differences between the two models,” but those are differences that presuppose that “foundation.”

To take another example, Wierzbicka attributes to Locke considerable influence in shifting the meaning of “evidence” from those truths which are undeniable (“evident”) to the one calling for epistemic care and modesty: “But although the ‘evidence of facts’ was often seen as ‘strong,’ even ‘unquestionable,’ the certainty derived from factual (and ultimately sense-related) knowledge did not seem as absolute as that previously linked with faith, ‘mathematical certainty,’ or, indeed, an ‘ocular proof’: as Locke put it, ‘certainty and demonstration, are things we must not, in these matters, pretend to.

Locke’s views on these matters were no doubt symptomatic of a wider mood of the British Enlightenment, and above all, they were themselves hugely influential: it is widely acknowledged that epistemic caution and modesty preached by Locke had an enormous impact on his contemporaries and on many subsequent generations of his readers (146).

[2] To take just one out of many possible examples in his *Philosophical Investigations*, we might look at his brief discussion in sections 101-105 of the “ideal” that “there can’t be any vagueness in logic,” an ideal which “absorbs us,” and leads us to believe “it must be in

reality." And, so, "[t]he strict and clear rules of the logical structure of propositions appear to us as something hidden in the background. . . . Where does this idea come from? It is like a pair of glasses on our nose through which we see whatever we look at. It never occurs to us to take them off. . . . When we believe we must find that order, must find the ideal, in our actual language, we become dissatisfied with what are ordinarily called 'propositions,' 'words,' 'signs'" (45-6). As literate beings, we have constructed a logic out of "actual language," projected that logic onto that language, and then find the language less "real" because the grammar doesn't seem to be "there."

[3] See, for example, *Originary Thinking*, 219.