

Michael Silverstein (1945–2020)

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The death of Michael Silverstein on July 17, 2020 has deprived sociolinguistics/linguistic anthropology of its most creative intellectual force: a figure who, in his writing, teaching, organizing, and vivid interactional presence, was probably more responsible than any other person for placing the problem of language in use at the very center of humanistic and social scientific studies of human communication. Along the way, he helped to reorient two erstwhile separate disciplinary and epistemic projects—sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology—to a single, shared focus of inquiry.

In a recent retrospective examination of this convergence, he formulates this shared focus as a question: ‘How do people mutually coordinate as strategic, sometimes even agentive co-participants in communicative events using the affordances of multiple cultural codes, among them denotational language?’ (Silverstein 2017a:93–94).

The forty-plus year history Silverstein recounts includes many figures familiar to readers of *Language in Society*—Hymes, Goffman, Gumperz, Labov, and others—and his own teacher Roman Jakobson (1896–1982), dubbed ‘the Hermes of Cambridge [Mass.] linguistics’ (2017a:110), plays a pivotal role at several key junctures. Interestingly, one major character is missing from this story: the narrator himself. For surely, in future histories of these fields, Michael Silverstein will be a central figure, the ‘trickster-transformer’ who helped to create the intellectual world that we, as students of language in culture/society, will continue to inhabit as best we can.

Michael Silverstein was born in Brooklyn on September 12, 1945, to Robert and Myrna Silverstein. His father was the master plumber on high-rise residential jobs in Brooklyn and Queens, once getting into a physical altercation with Fred Trump on a construction site. When Michael was 13, his mother began a career as volunteer coordinator for Maimonides Hospital, now Maimonides Medical Center in Brooklyn. The family lived in the Borough Park section, then an ethnically mixed community of aspiring families of various immigrant backgrounds (Italian, German, Irish, Jewish, etc.; today it is an ultra-Orthodox (Hasidic) enclave). Michael attended the nearby PS 180, serving as projectionist whenever films were shown in the school auditorium. From the age of fourteen, he attended Peter Stuyvesant High School in Manhattan, graduating as Class Salutatorian in June 1962 (see his ‘Coda’, this issue, for a vivid recollection of this period).

The following autumn he entered Harvard College at the age of sixteen, graduating *summa cum laude* after three years of study, in 1965, in Linguistics and Romance Languages. He pursued graduate study in Linguistics at Harvard, where he came under the influence of teachers such as Karl V. Teeter (1929–2007) in American Indian languages, Jerzy Kuryłowicz (1895–1978) in historical linguistics, and Einar Haugen (1906–1994) in sociolinguistics, in addition to Roman Jakobson. Between July 1969 and June 1972 he was a Junior Fellow in the Society of Fellows, where he formed lasting friendships with the Algonquianist linguist R. H. Ives Goddard, among others. He received the PhD in 1972 with a dissertation on problems in the historical reconstruction of California Penutian (Silverstein 1972c).

Aside from brief interludes during periods of leave in the late 1970s, Silverstein spent his entire career at the University of Chicago, arriving in the autumn quarter of 1970 with the bespoke title of Visiting Assistant Professor of Anthropological Linguistics (Departments of Anthropology and Linguistics).¹ The following year he became Associate Professor of Anthropology and Linguistics; from 1974 to 1978 he served as Associate Professor of Anthropology, Linguistics, and Behavioral Sciences (Cognition and Communication), after which he was made a full Professor; he later occupied two named chairs in the University, serving as Samuel N. Harper Professor (1984–1996), and finally as Charles F. Grey Distinguished Service Professor of Anthropology, Linguistics, and Psychology (from 1997). Alongside his teaching and research, Silverstein provided manifold services to the Department and the University, serving as Chair of the Anthropology Department (1982–1984); as an elected member of the University Senate (1980–1983, 1992–1995, 1998–2001); on the Board of the University Library (member, 1981–1984, 1996–1999; chair, 1997–1999); and on the Institutional Review Board for Research with Human Subjects (IRB) (member, 1997–2000; 2001–2005; Chair, 2005–2012), to name only a few.

Among many other honors and awards, Silverstein received a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship in 1979, and won a MacArthur Prize Fellowship in 1982, in the second cohort of awardees. He was elected a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1991, and elected a Resident Member of the American Philosophical Society in 2008. In 2014 the American Anthropological Association awarded him the Franz Boas Prize for Exemplary Service to Anthropology.

From his first (Autumn 1969) quarter at Chicago to his last (Autumn 2019), Silverstein taught a course, ‘Language in Culture’ (Anth 372), that has proven pivotal to the lives and careers of generations of linguistic anthropologists, sociolinguists, and others. He first conceived the course during the summer of 1970 on the Yakima (today spelled Yakama) Reservation in central Washington State. His fieldwork activities were interrupted on his arrival when he badly broke his ankle while playing frisbee with local children. The 24-year-old was forced to return to Cambridge to convalesce; after a morphine-aided recovery from surgery, he continued work on his syllabus.

Departmental colleagues at Chicago had asked him to teach a ‘Language and Culture’ course; he insisted it be called ‘Language IN Culture,’ and taught it for the next fifty years, constantly revising and reorganizing it, adding new readings and (sometimes) discarding older ones. This was a course with a constantly evolving ‘argument’. A chronological study of the evolution of this syllabus would provide a kind of palimpsest of the development of Silverstein’s own ideas over the period, despite the fact that very few of his own writings appeared on it. He once described it to me as ‘a revolutionary proposal masquerading as a careful re-reading of the classics’. It is fair to say that all of his students, as well as many of his colleagues, experienced his boundless intellectual generosity, and benefited from the close attention he gave to their work, exemplified in the dense annotations he added in his distinctive hand, always in blue ink from his Mont Blanc fountain pen.

Beginning in July 1966, Silverstein carried out linguistic and ethnographic fieldwork with speakers of Wasco-Wishram (Upper Chinookan; known natively as Kiksht) at Yakama Reservation (Washington) and Warm Springs Reservation (Oregon), and in various nearby locales along the Columbia River; he returned to the area every summer from 1967 to 1971, with briefer visits in January (1972 and 1974), and an extended period (July–December) in 1976. Out of this fieldwork—coupled with his immersion in earlier work on Chinookan by Franz Boas, Edward Sapir, Walter Dyk, Melville Jacobs, Dell Hymes, and others—Silverstein produced a monograph tracing the historical development of tense and aspect systems across the Chinookan languages (1974), along with studies of the expression of person, number, and gender categories (1977), split-ergative case marking (1976b), the non-referential indexical function of so-called ‘sound symbolism’ (1981a, 1994a), the discourse-level implications of Chinookan ‘verbs of saying’ (1979b/1985), lexical and syntactic derivational processes (1984a), and naming practices (1984b), to list only a few. He also contributed the definitive reference work on the contact history of the Chinookan peoples (1973/1990).

A second period of fieldwork, this time in Western Australia among Worora and related Northern Kimberley Aboriginal groups (Wunjawudjagu, Unggumi, Umiidee), occupied him from September 1974 to December 1975. The concerns of this fieldwork spanned linguistics, social anthropology, and applied ‘action anthropology’ of Mowanjum, a complex contact community in transition. Out of this work emerged studies of Worora kinship (2013a), naming practices (1980b), and verb classifiers (1986b), among other topics; material on the split-ergative case marking systems of Worora and other Australian Aboriginal languages was brought together with comparable data on Chinookan split ergativity to form the empirical basis of ‘Hierarchy of features and ergativity’ (1976b), one of Silverstein’s most widely read and influential contributions to linguistics.

Over a half-century of nonstop research and writing, Michael Silverstein contributed to a wide range of disciplines and fields concerned with language and communication, combining a remarkable amplitude of conceptual vision with a sublime—in its original sense: terrifying, and inspirational—level of analytic energy and concentrated attention to empirical detail.

The lines of research that absorbed his interest—to several of which he made important, even transformative contributions—spanned sociolinguistics/linguistic anthropology, semiotics, language and cognition, morphosyntactic typology, historical linguistics and language contact, the history and sociology of linguistics and anthropology, and political communication in the contemporary US.

Three conceptual developments, taken together, have driven the convergence of linguistic anthropology with sociolinguistics over recent decades: *indexicality* as the key to understanding speech-in-context as social practice; *linguistic ideologies* as circulating forms of reasoning about relationships between languages and social groups; and *enregisterment* as a way of understanding how variation in speech becomes a resource for the performance (and ascription) of identity, connecting the real-time dynamics of ‘micro-’ interactions to forces operating at larger socio-historical scales (see also Agha 2004, 2007a). In all three areas, Silverstein has been a pioneer, and often an originator, and his ideas have received significant uptake by sociolinguists (see e.g. Eckert 2008; Johnstone & Kiesling 2008).

Midway through his career, Silverstein identified what he understood to be ‘the central datum for a science of language’. This he dubbed *the total linguistic fact*, defining it as ‘an unstable mutual interaction of meaningful sign FORMS contextualized to situations of interested human USE, mediated by the fact of cultural IDEOLOGY’ (Silverstein 1985a:220, emphases added).²

STRUCTURE (OF FORM) points to the realm of grammar—akin to Saussure’s *langue*, a systematic organization of linguistic types potentially contributing to denotation. This is the realm to which (unhyphenated) Linguistics has laid an exclusive (and jealously guarded) claim (see Agha 2007b).

USE, by contrast, centers on the flow of linguistic tokens in real-time verbal interaction, akin to Saussure’s *parole*; this is the realm of pragmatics, in which utterance-partials—whatever they may be contributing to propositional information—function *indexically* to point to (and create) relevant aspects of the context in which communication takes place.

IDEOLOGY, finally, centers in the first instance on the ‘socially emergent reflectivity’ of language users themselves, their ‘meta-level apprehensions of language as behavior and structure’, seeking ‘to rationalize usage (and structure)’ in terms of circulating ideas or models that themselves may emanate from ‘authorizing’ institutional sources in society (1985a:223).

As Kathryn Woolard has pointed out, ‘all three elements—linguistic form, social use, and human reflections on these forms in use—mutually shape and inform each other. To understand and explain any one of them we must take into

account both of the other two, in Silverstein's view. If not, we have not just a partial explanation but in fact only a partial object' (Woolard 2008:436).

Unsurprisingly, a concern with STRUCTURE dominated the earliest stages of Silverstein's intellectual development. At the age of twelve, he happened upon a copy of H. A. Gleason Jr.'s *Introduction to descriptive linguistics* (Gleason 1955) in a public library (it was the standard textbook for US-based neo-Bloomfieldian linguistics of the time)—and devoured it, resolving then and there to become a linguist.³ He never looked back; one of his teachers at Stuyvesant supported his choice of a vocation, remarking that 'Language is too important to be left to the linguists'.

A second life-changing encounter with text(s) took place early in his undergraduate years at Harvard, when he discovered the early Bulletins and Reports of the Bureau of American Ethnology in the basement library of the Peabody Museum: here were text collections, grammatical sketches, lexicons, and other material on Native North American languages, languages unlike any he had seen before.

Participating in the Seminar in American Indian Linguistics (directed by Karl Teeter), Silverstein devoted himself to the historical reconstruction of languages belonging to Sapir's proposed Penutian 'phylum', eventually producing in 1965 his BA Honor's thesis, 'Penutian: The grammatical dimension of Sapir's hypothesis' (1965).

At the same time, Chomsky's 'Generative linguistics', emerging down the road at MIT, was in the air, and Silverstein came under its influence, producing in the spring of 1964 a forty-page term paper in which he attempted to 'rewrite' Sapir's 1912 grammar of the Oregon Penutian language Takelma using phrase-structure rules derived from Chomsky's pre-*Aspects* (Chomsky 1965) model. This exercise convinced him that Chomsky's ideas simply wouldn't work for languages like Takelma: 'The magnificence of Sapir's analysis permits the expansion of [the phrase structure rules] to be within the limits, generally, of the units he isolated. Sapir's analysis approaches the ideal of using just what is functional and 'natural' to the language; i.e., uncontrived' (Silverstein 1964:27).

During the decade of the 1970s Silverstein emerged to prominence in both of his focal disciplines of linguistics and anthropology, in both cases with radical interventions that shifted the direction of theorizing in the respective fields: 'Shifters, linguistic categories, and cultural description' (1976a) and 'Hierarchy of features and ergativity' (1976b) both published in 1976, were addressed to very different readerships (cultural anthropologists and formal linguists, respectively), and are very different in style and substance. But both rested on—and argued for—a fundamental insight of Silverstein's teacher Roman Jakobson: that STRUCTURE and USE are in fact inseparable from each other; put another way, that USE is immanent in STRUCTURE, a fact that can be observed in every known language of the world.

Silverstein's 'Shifters' article (1976a) invokes in its title a monograph by Jakobson that was distributed as a *samizdat* by the Russian Language Project in the Department of Slavic Languages at Harvard University in 1957, entitled 'Shifters,

verbal categories, and the Russian verb' (Jakobson 1957).⁴ Jakobson's essay brought the ideas of the American logician C. S. Peirce (1839–1914) to the attention of linguists, just as Silverstein's later essay introduced them to anthropologists. Jakobson's point was to show that many core categories of grammar—including tense, mood, evidentiality, and person—were irreducibly *indexical* in character: it is simply impossible to interpret the 'meaning' of these categories—or of everyday expressions like *I, you, here/there, this/that*, etc.—without attending to their USE as utterance tokens in specific contexts of verbal interaction.

If the purpose of Jakobson's 1957 article is 'to show precisely the extent to which information about *parole* ['speech'] is encoded in grammar'—to show, in other words, 'how language grammaticalizes or encodes features of the context of utterance' (Caton 1987:235)—then the aim of Silverstein's own 'Shifters' essay was to argue for the centrality of language in culture, and specifically to 'demonstrate that [the] "pragmatic" analysis of speech behavior—in that tradition extending from Peirce to Jakobson—allows us to describe the real linkage of language to culture, and perhaps the most important aspect of the "meaning" of speech' (Silverstein 1976a:11–12). Silverstein's essay entered a disciplinary conversation already underway in anthropology, in which 'meaning' was perhaps the central—if poorly-defined—concept around which the whole discourse of 'symbolic anthropology' revolved (see e.g. Geertz 1973).

Silverstein's 'Shifters' essay has had a lasting impact on the development of linguistic anthropology. It introduced new and important distinctions into the study of indexicality in language and communication: the distinction, on formal-functional grounds, between *referential* (or denotational) *indexicality* and *non-referential* (or 'pure') *indexicality*; and the distinction between two indexical modes, termed *presupposing indexicality* and *entailing* (or 'creative') *indexicality*. A third distinction, between different 'orders of indexicality' (first- and second-order, or n^{th} - and n^{th+1}) was refined in later work (Silverstein 2003b). From here on, *metapragmatics*—the ideologically saturated (hence, 'second-order') construal of pragmatic phenomena, oriented to culturally specific norms—would take center stage in his work.

'Hierarchy of features and ergativity' (1976b) was a major contribution to morphosyntactic typology in linguistics. Its centerpiece is a theoretical calque, from Jakobsonian feature-based phonology—where the bundles of 'distinctive features' that define phonemic segments provide an extensional metalanguage for sound—to the referential content of nouns. Based on sketches of the case-marking systems found in so-called 'ergative'⁵ languages of North America (Chinookan, Eskimo) and Aboriginal Australia (Dyirbal, Worora, and several others), Silverstein demonstrates that all of these languages in fact display a 'split' in their case-marking systems: a dominant 'ergative' pattern of case marking becomes 'nominative-accusative' when transitive subject (agent) and direct object (patient) have certain referential characteristics or values. The diagonalized feature matrix at the center of the paper provides a language-universal grid of possibilities, a way of

accounting for where such ‘splits’ will occur in various languages. More to the point, it shows how case marking is sensitive to the difference between noun phrases denoting *speech-event participants* (e.g. speakers and addressees) and non-participants (e.g. various ‘third persons’). In Chinookan, for example, ‘she told her’—where both agent and patient are third persons—displays ergative-absolutive case marking, but ‘I told you’ is marked in a ‘nominative-accusative’ pattern. Recall that ‘I’ and ‘you’ are both ‘shifters.’ Even if case as a grammatical category is not in itself a ‘shifter’, the marking of case in split-ergative languages responds to—is determined by—*indexicality* on the plane of reference: another sense in which USE is always already embedded (rather deeply) in STRUCTURE. Implicitly, the analysis represents a frontal attack on the ‘context-free’ assumptions underlying formal (Chomskyan) grammar, and it helped to spawn a self-styled ‘functionalist’ school within linguistics (see e.g. Givón 1984)—though Silverstein, for various reasons, never aligned himself with this movement.

With the publication in 1979 of an extended essay on ‘Language structure and linguistic ideology’ (1979a), the three elements of ‘the total linguistic fact’ are established, with the essay essentially founding the study of language (or linguistic) ideology as a central concern of linguistic anthropology (and eventually, sociolinguistics) with a large and still-growing literature of its own.⁶

Chronology is a poor guide in assessing the work of a scholar who, in any given year, contributed to multiple disciplines and research traditions via a dizzying array of conference presentations, published articles, and unpublished (or pre-published) papers distributed informally, *samizdat*-style. Silverstein’s intellectual projects were multifilar and interconnected, making a linear account difficult if not impossible. He also remained interested in virtually every topic or problem that had ever absorbed his attention: he wrote about the great nineteenth-century Sanskritist William Dwight Whitney in 1971, and again in 1994(b); historical linguistics, perhaps his first sustained focus of attention in the mid 1960s, remained important across his career, surfacing multiple times over the decades (particularly in work on Chinookan; see e.g. 1974, 1977), and is central to a recent theoretical contribution, ‘The “push” of *Lautgesetze*, the “pull” of enregisterment’ (2016b); the sociolinguistics of language contact likewise (e.g. 1972a, 1997a, b, 1998b, 2015). The history and sociology of anthropology and linguistics as disciplines is another career-spanning focus; notable here are studies of ‘The diachrony of Sapir’s synchronic linguistic description; or, Sapir’s “cosmographical” linguistics’ (1986a), and the retrospective account of the convergence of sociolinguistics with linguistic anthropology with which we began (2017a).⁷

And yet it is possible to discern some distinct lines of inquiry, and to identify some landmark contributions. The work on case marking and morphosyntactic typology initiated in ‘Hierarchy of features’ (1976b) had multiple *sequelae* (e.g. 1980c/1993, 1981c), and was the point of departure for several important studies at the interface of linguistic anthropology and cognitive psychology (e.g. 1985b, 1987a, b; see also 1980a).

Language ideology was central to several major publications: a later contribution pointed to the irreducibly ideological character of metapragmatics/second-order indexicality: ‘Ideology construes indexicality. In so doing ideology inevitably biases its metapragmatic ‘take’ so as to create another potential order of effective indexicality that bears what we can appreciate sometimes as a truly ironic relation to the first’ (1998a:315). Linguistic ideology was central to his treatment of ‘Language and the culture of gender’ (1985a, cited above), and to his study of ‘Whorfianism and the linguistic imagination of nationality’ (2000), which effectively ‘re-provincialized’ the influential ideas of Benedict Anderson (1983) by viewing Anderson’s argument as itself the product of the sociopolitical (and sociolinguistic) project of language standardization, a special case of the more general phenomenon of enregisterment.

An absorption in the politics of language—central to the ‘Whorfianism’ paper—also embraced the language of politics, especially in the US. The phenomena central to a study of ‘Monoglot “Standard” in America: Standardization and metaphors of linguistic hegemony’ (1987d, reprinted 1996) were situated in a deeper historical context in ‘Society, polity, and language community: An enlightenment trinity in anthropological perspective’ (2010a). Contemporary US politics served as the backdrop for *Talking politics: The substance of style from Abe to ‘W’*, which he referred to as his ‘pamphlet’ (2003a), and for studies of ‘message’ in US electoral politics (e.g. 2011), culminating in *Creatures of politics* (2012), a book co-authored with Michael Lempert.

Language USE—the moment-by-moment unfolding of discursive interaction, captured (partially) in transcripts—had become a central focus of Silverstein’s work by the mid 1980s. A ‘getting-to-know-you’ conversation between two graduate students at the University of Chicago (‘Mr. A’ from the School of Law, ‘Mr. B’ from the School of Social Services Administration) had been recorded on video- and audiotape by Silverstein’s Psychology colleague Starkey Duncan in the early 1970s as part of a project on nonverbal communication (see Duncan & Fiske 1977). A brief swatch of this conversation, with a transcript that Silverstein re-designed to reflect the unfolding ‘poetic’ structure of the talk, enabled him to show how communication emerges from a dialectical interplay between *denotational text*—more or less, the ‘what’ of what is said—and *interactional text*: what is ‘done’ in and by saying that (see e.g. Silverstein 1993a).

This transcript, later augmented by others drawn from the same project, reappeared in several publications (see e.g. Silverstein 1985c, 1997c, 2004, 2014), and helped to motivate a larger claim: that all events of communication involving the use of language (and other semiotic resources) manifest, in their poetic organization, an emergent ‘ritual’ form that grounds interactions taking place in various heres-and-nows in more encompassing cultural (even, cosmic) orders. Small, fleeting ‘interaction rituals’ (Goffman 1967) like those involving ‘Mr. A’ and ‘Mr. B’ differ from large-scale, public rituals like the ceremony of the Eucharist only in degree, not in kind. In the latter examples of ‘full-tilt’ ritual, we observe the

Jakobsonian ‘poetic principle’ (Jakobson 1960) at a kind of saturation point, exhaustively patterning all the semiotic modalities (language, gesture, bodily movement, and even sensory channels like vision and olfaction) together in the event, such that *entextualization* (the coming-to-form of denotational text) and *contextualization* (the emergent interactional text) seem to form a seamless whole.⁸

A cluster of papers devoted to *oinoglossia*—‘wine talk’—illustrates how Silverstein was increasingly able in later years to show how his longstanding concerns converged in the analysis of particular domains of cultural and semiotic activity. Wine connoisseurship, exemplified in the textual genre of the tasting note, centrally involves a lexical register; but tasting notes, as entextualized, display their own internal poetic structure, which turns out to be ‘keyed’ (contextualized) to the temporal phases of a ritual encounter: a wine tasting. Over the time-course of the encounter between a connoisseur and a wine, the ritual—like all rituals, large or small—performatively effectuates a transformation of social relations and identities: by the end of the encounter, the characterological attributes of the wine (its ‘breeding’, ‘nobility’, ‘finesse’, etc.) have become those of the one who ingests it. Silverstein identified this as an example of ‘Eucharistic consumption’, and showed how this cultural schema continues to spread, ‘emanating’ from the domain of wine to include many other ‘prestige comestibles’: coffee, chocolate, beer, and many other products are now marketed with ‘tasting notes’ of their own (1989, 2006, 2013b, 2016a).

Silverstein produced a number of comprehensive, programmatic statements of his overall approach, the ‘Shifters’ essay of 1976 arguably the first. A pair of papers from the early 1990s—‘Metapragmatic discourse and metapragmatic function’ (1993a) and ‘The indeterminacy of contextualization: When is enough enough?’ (1992)—outlined his theoretical architectonics in detail, albeit with very few illustrative examples. Later synthetic statements came increasingly to resemble synoptic versions of the ‘Language in culture’ course, setting out a series of ‘case studies’, and placing encapsulated versions of his own original analyses side-by-side with examples drawn from the literature, including many familiar to sociolinguists and linguistic anthropologists—but always subjecting these nuggets of received wisdom to thoroughgoing re-analysis (recall: ‘a revolutionary proposal masquerading as a careful re-reading of the classics’).

‘Indexical order and the dialectics of sociolinguistic life’ (2003b)⁹ exemplifies this approach: here, Silverstein works through (and re-transcribes) an example from Levinson’s *Pragmatics* (1983:305), re-analyzes Brown & Gilman’s (1960) classic treatment of address forms through the lens of register, presents the diagonalized feature matrix from ‘Hierarchy of features’—repurposed here to place familiar ‘T/V’ systems alongside Javanese honorifics—and re-analyzes Labov’s famous work on ‘hypercorrection’ in New York City English—suggesting that Labov, unbeknownst to himself, was providing an account of enregisterment under standardization—concluding with a discussion of his own work on wine talk (*oinoglossia*).

An essay published in the following year, “‘Cultural’ concepts and the language-culture nexus’ (2004), aimed at an anthropological readership, adopts a similar approach, taking the reader on a ‘guided tour’ whose itinerary leads from a discussion of the ‘Mr. A and Mr. B’ transcript to a thorough semiotic analysis of the ceremony of the Eucharist, thence to a discussion of the ‘dynamic figurational structure’ of a piece of Rotinese oratory and a re-analysis of his friend Stanley Tambiah’s classic work on concepts of ‘edibility’ among Thai villagers, concluding once again with oinoglossia. The purpose here was to argue for what Silverstein called a ‘sign’s eye view’ of communicative semiosis, a view that ‘unites the traditional linguist’s concern for formedness of messages (utterances, texts, ...) with concern for the contextualization conditions of messages—semiotically, their indexicalities or conditions of co-occurrence with various factors of the communicative situation’ (2004:631, n. 11). More recently, Silverstein began using similar approaches to reach readerships in comparative literature and English (2014, 2017b, 2019).

At the time when he received a diagnosis of glioblastoma (brain cancer) in the early summer of 2019, Silverstein was already embarked on revising the notes he’d prepared for a series of eight lectures at the Linguistic Society of America’s Summer Institute, held at the University of Kentucky (Lexington) in 2017, for publication as a book. He continued the work of revision through what turned out to be his final year, with assistance from colleagues and students. *Language in culture: Lectures on the social semiotics of communication* (2022), will appear soon from Cambridge University Press.

Edward Sapir’s Yale colleague, the Sanskritist Franklin Edgerton, remarked in his obituary that Sapir ‘seemed able to meet every one of us on our own grounds, to see the minutiae of many provinces as with a magnifying glass, and at the same time effortlessly to survey the whole terrain... [M]any of us do not think it going too far to call him a genius’ (Edgerton 1940/1984:462–63). All of this might equally be said of Silverstein.

Michael Silverstein is survived by his wife and partner of thirty-eight years, the journalist and educator Mara Tapp, and by their two children, Ariella and G.

NOTES

¹As soon as he had the institutional wherewithal to do so, Silverstein ensured that this kind of ‘dual citizenship’—equal status in the Departments of Linguistics (Humanities Division) and Anthropology (Social Sciences Division)—was available to PhD students at Chicago, via the Joint Degree Program in Anthropology and Linguistics, which required students to pass qualifying examinations in both departments (and assemble a PhD committee with representatives of both). He was ensuring that others would have access to the same kind of intellectual experience that he had created for himself at Harvard.

²The allusion is to the French sociologist Marcel Mauss’s (1872–1950) argument that the phenomenon of gift exchange constitutes ‘a total social fact’ (*fait social total*): the phenomena of exchange, Mauss argued, ‘are at once legal, economic, religious, aesthetic, morphological and so on. They are

legal in that they concern individual and collective rights, organized and diffuse morality; they may be entirely obligatory, or subject simply to praise or disapproval. They are at once political and domestic, being of interest both to classes and to clans and families. They are religious; they concern true religion, animism, magic and diffuse religious mentality. They are economic, for the notions of value, utility, interest, luxury, wealth, acquisition, accumulation, consumption and liberal and sumptuous expenditure are all present' (Mauss 1925/1966:76–77).

³He describes this watershed moment in an online video produced in 2015 by the American Philosophical Society: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Q_o1xqtt5c (at 3'20").

⁴The term *shifter* was coined by Jespersen (1922:123), writing (in English) about 'a class of words which presents grave difficulty to children': 'The most important class of shifters', wrote Jespersen, 'are the personal pronouns. The child knows the word "I" meaning "Father", then again meaning "Mother", then again "Uncle Peter", and so on unendingly in the most confusing manner' (Jespersen 1922:123). The reference of forms like 'I' and 'you', then, 'shifts' depending on who is uttering it at any given moment.

⁵'Nominative-accusative' case-marking treats intransitive subjects (*She slept*) and transitive subjects (*She told her*) identically, and direct objects differently (*She told her*); 'ergative-absolutive' case-marking treats intransitive subjects and direct objects identically, and transitive subjects differently.

⁶See e.g. Schieffelin, Woolard, & Kroskrity 1998; Gal & Irvine 2019; Kroskrity 2000; Irvine & Gal 2000, to name only a few.

⁷Silverstein was also pre-eminent as a writer of obituaries of linguists and anthropologists: Melville Jacobs (1972b), Walter Dyk (1974; co-authored with Fred Eggan), Roman Jakobson (1982), Stanley Newman (1987c), Charles F. Hockett (2003c), Norman McQuown (2005), Joseph Greenberg (2002), and Dell Hymes (2010b) all received meticulous necrologies.

⁸The focus on ritual poetics had announced itself, far earlier, in a remarkable—and still unpublished—paper, 'Metaforces of power in traditional oratory' (Silverstein 1981b).

⁹Another allusive title: compare Robert F. Murphy's book *The dialectics of social life: Alarms and excursions in anthropological theory* (1971).

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