INTRODUCTION:
FROM THE IDEAL, THE ORDINARY, AND THE ORDERLY
TO CONFLICT AND VIOLENCE IN PRAGMATIC RESEARCH

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Maybe we should blame it all on Noam Chomsky. I am not referring here to his efforts to reduce the study of language to a purely cognitive domain in which only quasi-mathematical relations between formal structures are worthy of study. While its roots certainly run much deeper, pragmatics was formed in part by a reaction against Chomsky's foundational fiction: "linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-hearer in a completely homogeneous speech-community" (1965:3). If marginalizing context, dialogue, interaction, and history was the prime issue here, we could just as easily decry the power of Ferdinand de Saussure's (1959[1916]) *Course in General Linguistics* in marginalizing the study of what he called *parole* for half a century. But, conversation, indexicality, implicature, performativity, contextualization, and language ideologies have become key analytic concepts that drive research in pragmatics and adjacent fields. It is rather the chasm that separates Chomsky's political analysis, which has placed him in the international limelight as a public intellectual, and the exceedingly conservative stance he takes on the study of language. And when I say conservative here I do mean *politically* conservative—what else should we call a denial that difference, conflict, institutions, social inequality, and history shape language, an attempt to root social and political analysis out of linguistics, and the claim that scholarly endeavors exist apart from the politics of contemporary society?

For those of us who do not share Chomsky's view of language, it is easy to dismiss his often stated claim (the question comes up nearly every time he gives a public lecture) that his work in linguistics and politics have nothing to do with one another. But the buck can't stop with Chomsky, in that the potential contribution of many of the insights provide pragmatics with an alternative theoretical agenda for revealing the power of language in shaping politics and the political constitution of language lies unexploited if not, in some cases, suppressed.

The contributors to this special issue came together at the 1996 International Pragmatics Conference in Mexico in order to explore the value—for both pragmatics and political analysis—of deeming these foci to be fundamentally inextricable and mutually informing rather construing them as modes of inquiry that are in complementary

distribution.[1] While some of the essays explore specific points at which work in pragmatics has marginalized or erased its political underpinnings and implications, their principal contribution lies in showing how close pragmatic readings of discourse simultaneously inform and are shaped by both micro- and macro-political processes. In the course of addressing these issues, the articles make both empirical and theoretical contributions that lead in the direction of a major shift in the premises that guide research in pragmatics.

1. Scientific idealization and the search for ordinary discourse

Scientists have long seen their task as that of discerning principles that relate to as wide a range of phenomena as possible; "universal laws" are generally accorded a privileged status, and the cachet diminishes with decreasing generality. In his *Principles of Pragmatics,* Geoffrey Leech (1983: 7) argues that "Any account of meaning in language must (a) be faithful to the facts as we observe them, and (b) must be as simple and generalizable as possible." He invokes oppositions between abstract *versus* concrete and general *versus* local in according priority to "general pragmatics," which he defines as "the study of the general conditions of the communicative use of language, and to exclude more specific 'local' conditions on language"; the latter phenomena (if one accepts the distinction he is drawing) are relegated to the domain of "socio-pragmatics" (1983: 10).

This meta-theoretical preoccupation with the abstract and general hearkens strongly back definitions of science that have prevailed since the seventeenth century. As Gruner (1997: 114) argues, the reformulation of the scientific project that emerged during this period was distinguished by a new emphasis on and the development of new methods for rendering knowledge and idealization more abstract. John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1959[1690]), which profoundly shaped modern conceptions of language (Aarsleff 1982), extended this project to the study of language (see Bauman and Briggs 1997). Even scholars who reject the particular form that this quest takes in the work of Saussure and Chomsky often accept epistemological hierarchies that privilege formulations that are framed as abstract and as applying to a wide range of cases.

This epistemological predilection leads researchers to adopt methodological strategies that concentrate on phenomena that seem to afford direct access into more abstract and general aspects of language and communication. Many researchers have privileged "everyday" or "ordinary" language use in hopes of identifying widely distributed rules, norms, strategies, structures, or processes. Leech's *Principles of Pragmatics* again provides a good case in point. Arguing that general pragmatics "will be limited . . . to a RHETORICAL model of pragmatics (1983: 11), he goes on to place his definition of rhetoric both in the tradition of and in opposition to classical senses of the term. While sharing a common concern with "the effective use of language in communication" (one might quibble here with the implication that classical rhetoric dealt with language alone), Leech (1983: 15) limits pragmatics "primarily to everyday conversation," placing the study

of "more prepared and public uses of language" in secondary place.

While the clarity of Leech's definitions make his exposition an useful example, he is hardly alone. Conversation analysis (CA) in particular goes much. As Heritage and Atkinson assert, "Within conversation analysis there is an insistence on the use of materials collected from *naturally occurring* occasions of everyday interaction by means of audio- and video-recording equipment or film" (1984: 2; emphasis in the original). Beyond placing further restrictions on the scope of the "everyday" and on how conversation must be documented, CA rests not simply on the marginalization of other types of data but on their exclusion. In spite of the commitment of conversation analysts to eschew the introduction of analytic terms and categories that do not demonstrably flow from the interaction in question, this notion of the "ordinary" or "everyday" emerges not from "the data" themselves but is rather a commonsense concept that is imposed on particular discourses. This methodological commitment involves not only searching for particular sorts of events and rejecting others but in extracting them from the particular historical, social, and cultural circumstances in which they emerge, thereby making them seem "ordinary" and facilitating their synecdochic use as exemplars of more general processes.

The contributors to this special issue depart from these epistemological and methodological premises in three crucial ways. First, they have selected data that are *extra*ordinary, involving such phenomena as physical altercations, acts of violence that result in prison sentences, contestations of national political ideologies, peace negotiations between insurgent forces and nation-states, murder trials, and political debates. Some of these events are extraordinary not simply in the sense of departing from commonsense notions of what everyday interaction is all about but by virtue of their historical significance. Asif Agha analyzes forms of "tropic aggression" that shape the course of a debate between Bill Clinton and Bob Dole that took place in the course of the 1996 presidential election in the United States. This encounter clearly not only was lodged in a particular set of historical circumstances but helped to produce the political tenor of the times. María Eugenia Villalón and Sandra Angeleri describe a series of bold discursive moves by members of a guerrilla organization that inaugurated peace dialogues with the Colombian government. The notion that these exchanges changed the political landscape does not seem to be held by the authors alone; rather, a shared sense of being in the historical limelight seems to have enabled the parties to sustain their engagement, even if it did not prove sufficient to engender a lasting settlement.

Second, these discourses do not simply *represent* conflict and violence but themselves play a significant role in constructing violent acts and in shaping their political effects. Jan Blommaert studies political debates that center on a major policy statement on immigration in Belgium. Portrayals of the cultural and political values of Belgians *versus* immigrants that emerged in these exchanges helped to shape the very conditions of life for immigrants. Briggs examines the collaboration of Venezuelan judicial and medical authorities in construing the death of an infant as an act of infanticide. He argues that the criminal case, which was the focus of much attention in the region, modeled the discursive and political silencing of persons labeled "indigenous" and their status as objects—but never agents—of political representation and decision-making. Patricia O'Connor details the narratives that male prisoners tell about their involvement in violent confrontations that take place within the prison walls. She argues that the production of highly gendered images that take place in such storytelling positions narrators within the larger economy of

violence in the prison, thereby limiting their vulnerability to lethal attack.

Third, the question of what is "ordinary" or "everyday" involves more than simply which data we select but crucially depends on how we frame and analyze them. By severing indexical links to broader social, political, and historical parameters, we can give even the most historically compelling discourses the look and feel of the mundane. These essays not only focus on discourses that are saturated with struggle and violence but show how analyzing dimensions of form and function entail close attention to conflict, discursive and other. John Haviland reports a series of arguments, most of which took place in Mexico. He argues that conventional understandings of such mechanisms as turn-taking, inference, and implicature do not adequately explain how the discourse is structured or its social consequences; grasping the peculiar patterning of these quarrels leads him to quarrel with the assumptions regarding cooperation, rationality, relevance, and politeness that underlie a number of influential formulations in pragmatics.

2. Beyond the borders of context

As linguists came to recognize the constitutive—rather than peripheral—role that indexicality placed in shaping the form, meaning, and effects of discourse (see Silverstein 1976), mapping signal to context relations became crucial. One of the primary contributions of CA and other modes of analyses was to show that this relation is not a fixed correlation between speech and language-external settings but an ongoing process of co-construction in which discourse is both shaped by and also shapes the context; to use Heritage's (1984) phrase, utterances are "doubly contextual." There is a strong tendency within extant research, however, to extend analysis of the active social process of contextualization (Gumperz 1986) only to the limits of what happens between the time that the tape recorder or video camera is turned on and off and only to what is audible (and, increasingly, visible); CA narrows the focus primarily to the intricate relations that link a utterance to what immediate precedes and follows it.

The contributions to this special issue point to the need to attend to a much broader set of contextual relations in order to see how discourse is embedded within and engenders conflict and violence. The episodes in the narrative recounted by Briggs clearly project a sense of unfolding one after another, both as segments of narratives and in terms of the actions they describe; closer analysis of court documents suggests that this sense of contextual cohesion is a potent legal fiction that is collaboratively constructed by a number of institutional officials in a variety of settings. While the statements uttered by Clinton and Dole clearly reflect adjacency relations with preceding questions and remarks and with subsequent rejoinders, the manner in which their turns came to be linked to one another in the political imagination was mediated by the news reports and commentaries that started to emerge within seconds after the debate ended. The "turns" that Villalón and Angeleri analyze were not adjacent—except perhaps on the front page of the newspapers that reported them on the following day. The exchanges reported by Blommaert not only took place across shifting publication and public presentation venues but drew their perlocutionary force from texts that they in turn revised.

The picture of discursive exchange that emerges from these papers converges with recent studies of discourse in institutional settings in suggesting that talk is often structured

vis-à-vis mediated relationships it bears to objects and texts that are dispersed in time and space (see Charles Goodwin and Marjorie Harness Goodwin 1996). These examples point to the value of seeing discourse not simply as produced and received within particular contexts but also as being actively *circulated* across substantial ranges of time, space, and modes of representation. Adopting this perspective opens up investigation of the mechanisms through individuals and institutions seek to regulate the circulation of speech and the social—including violent—consequences that accrue to it. Here O'Connor's account of the efforts undertaken by prisoners to shape what stories people tell about them and how these representations will affect their chances of being the victim of a deadly assault provides a striking reminder of the stakes of such attempts at regulation.

3. Questioning purported links between discursive and social order

Another theme pertains to conceptions of order and of orderliness. It has been assumed since the seventeenth century that science is based on a quest for order. The writings of Bacon, Hobbes, Locke, and others located the search for order in the human mind and in practical activity, particularly in the development of models that reveal order in a seemingly disorderly universe, the creation of social order between disparate individuals, and the material imposition of order on the "natural world" (see Gruner 1977; Hall 1963; MacPherson 1962). For Bacon, language was inherently disorderly, an obstacle to science and society. Locke saved the day for language once again, suggesting that language was in essence rational and orderly; writing in the aftermath of the devastating English civil wars, Locke argued that speech is "the great bond that holds society together" (1959[1690] II;148).

Those varieties of pragmatics that devote serious attention to the social nexus of language generally follow Locke in assuming not only that both signs and society are orderly but in deeming the creation of semiotic order to be a (if not *the)* fundamental mechanism for generating social order. As George Psathas (1995: 2) and many others have suggested, CA is centrally concerned with "the order/organization/orderliness of social action," or, in Harvey Sacks (1984) words, the proposition that "there is order at all points" in human conduct. John Lee (1987: 39) argues that CA seeks to resolve long-standing debates in sociology regarding the nature of social order by grounding its study in the analysis of natural conversation. Construing conversation as the primary site in which social order is produced on an ongoing basis provides a rationale for arguing that it constitutes a privileged locus for analyzing social action (see Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974). In acknowledging Hobbes' legacy in drawing attention to the problem of social order and Talcott Parsons' (1949) contribution to its modern sociological formations, Harold Garfinkel (1991: 17) argues that discerning order in the practical activity of ordinary society is the foundational mark of ethnomethodology's oppositional identity: "Distinctive emphases on the production and accountability of order* in and as ordinary activities identity ethnomethodological studies, and set them in contrast to classic studies, as an incommensurably alternate society.[2]

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[2] Garfinkel (1991: 18) states that the asterisk following "order" is a proxy for the "accompanying suffix: (order*) - in- and-as-of-the-workings-of-ordinary-society." Note that Garfinkel (1991: 14) places CA

The articles included in this collection form part of a growing body of work that questions order and orderliness are inherent in speech and other forms of social action as well as the functionalist arguments that seek to equate them. Several recent collections suggest that *dis*orderliness may be just as ordinary in discourse and that it yields important insights into everyday as well as extraordinary moments of social life (see Briggs 1996; Grimshaw 1990; O'Connor 1995). Other studies suggest that the quest for order may be rooted more squarely in *ideologies* of language (Schieffelin and Woolard 1994 and in press), than in everyday conversation and conduct in general (Joseph and Taylor 1990), more in public culture than in culture per se (Gal and Woolard 1995).

As the papers by Agha and Villalón and Angeleri show, scholars and others often impose an image of order and cooperation on dimensions of discourse that embody disorder. Haviland's examples suggest that even such cultural and social bedrock as notions of rationality, cooperation, and politeness and the role of conversation in injecting them into social life may be contingent on lay and scholarly assumptions that privilege everyday, ordinary interactions over overly conflictual exchanges. His closing remarks on the continuities between the legal battle that took place in Zinacantan in 1982 and the violent struggle that emerged in Chiapas in 1994 are intriguing; if the legions of ethnographers who conducted research in the region had paid more attention to conflict and been less concerned with generating portraits of orderly social, cultural, and ritual systems, their work would have provided a more solid basis for foreseeing the coming conflict.

Agha's analysis should help to forestall efforts to simply replace functionalist equations of linguistic and social order with equally reductionist assertions that discursive conflict provide some sort of transparent and natural foundation for social (dis)organization and discord. A variety of metadiscursive schemes of regimentation come into play in shaping both production and reception; the relationship between formal structures, social effects, and the perception of aggression is thus less adequately characterized by notions of transparency and shared orders of structure and meaning than by attending the contingent, ongoing process of regimentation. Michael Silverstein's (1993) work on metapragmatic regimentation provides a valuable framework for sorting out these complexities.

One could argue that the telling of first-person narratives about acts of violence by inmates creates the social order of the prison, with the caveat that it is probably the retelling of these stories when the protagonist is absent that most directly shapes his chances of survival. But O'Connor's analysis points to important gaps in speech exchange systems that problematize such an easy equation. While prisoners reflexively construct personae that position them as initiators rather than victims of violence, the narratives they tell eloquently point to pervasive and potentially fatal uncertainties regarding how adjacent utterances will be connected and what types of implicatures will be drawn; questions of membership categorization and mutual engagement only seem to become clear through the presence or absence of subsequent acts of violence. Outside of the seemingly disappearing realm of the classroom, saying as little as possible in conflictual situations seems to be the preferred strategy. Correspondences in the "tough" attitudes toward violence apparent in how inmates talk about themselves and those expressed by politicians and others on "the outside" point to a wide range of links between modes of representation and the practices that regulate and

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under the aegis of ethnomethodology.

sometimes kill bodies, but the connections are similarly far from direct and transparent.

The "Caracas Peace Dialogues" provide an excellent site in which to examine these questions, in that the practice of negotiation posits the ability of orderly talk to (re)create social order. While projecting a semblance of mutual engagement and clear, transparent relations of cohesion and coherence between adjacent turns was crucial for the political posturing of each party, the successive statements maximized discursive gaps as well as contextual and propositional ambiguity, making it difficult for opponents to locate agency and power and, in particular, to predict what the other party was likely to say next.

The notion that the form and content of discourse maps social action in stable and direct ways is the focus of Blommaert's paper; rather than locating it as part of his own analytic tool kit, however, he treats it as the dominant ideology that is used by politicians in authorizing their statements and discrediting those of their opponents. Deploying an ideology of the fixed text and an orderly process of interpretation permits continual extensions of the document's power to shape the political limits of debate about the "integration" of immigrants, thereby naturalizing hierarchical relations between persons placed in opposing categories.

The ideological equation of communicative and macro-social order generates profound political consequences in the Venezuelan infanticide trial. The young woman's guilt was deemed to be transparently evident in her failure to inform her employers and other authority figures of the pregnancy and birth; refusing to participate in the realm of everyday conversation purportedly signaled a rejection of the larger social order. A number of discursive devices are similarly used in making a court transcript appear to be a transparent record of a single interaction that unfolded in a single context, thereby hiding the complex intertextual and inter-institutional constitution of the "confession." It is the very act of rendering these complex links and silences invisible that makes the creation of highly asymmetrical power relations in one criminal case stand as a powerful icon for shifting inequalities of race, gender, and class in the region.

This efforts to link discursive and social order might lead us to recall that John Locke shaped not only notions of language and mind but also created the ideological roots and the discursive practices that helped construct and institutionalize social inequality in the modern world; he created not only a philosophy of language and mind but a political theory as well. When contemporary scholars posit direct and transparent relations between communicative and social order, whether they deem them to be inherent or achieved, they run the risk of adding further scientific legitimacy to discursive practices of social regimentation—including those that center on standardization, official monolingualism, and the measurement of "intelligence" vis-à-vis discursive skills that are selectively transmitted on the basis of race, class, and nationality. In commenting on these papers, Michael Silverstein notes the persistence of a range of different types of reductionism that are still common in work that falls under the aegis of pragmatics. He warns that what he refers to as "two textualities, the denotational and the interactional" are often conflated, thereby giving rise to analyses that attribute automatic social force to formal and functional devices—without seeing how the relationship between the two is mediated by complex webs of socio-cultural, historical, and political specificities.

In sum, these papers harness pragmatic theories and methodologies to the task of analyzing a wide range of types of violence and conflict and in revealing the discursive processes that are used in legitimating, naturalizing, and challenging them. At the same

time, the authors contribute to the still nascent task of reflecting on how this shift in focus reveals the need to examine and revise key assumptions that underlie work in pragmatics and related areas in general, even research that seeks to place struggle and disorder in the margins or to displace them from research on language as a whole.

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