


Article

The semiotics of the deictic field: Reckoning language and experience in East Los Angeles

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Abstract

This analysis examines the ways in which a single speaker, Ana, born in mid-century East Los Angeles, organizes and reflects upon her experiences of the city through language. Ana's story is one that sheds light on the experiences of many Mexican Americans who came of age at a critical time in a transitioning L.A., and the slow move of people who had been up until mid-century relegated largely in and around racially and socioeconomically segregated parts of L.A. These formative experiences are demonstrated to have informed the ways that speakers parse the social and geographical landscape along several dimensions, and this analysis interrogates the symbolic value of a special category of everyday language, *deixis*, to reveal the intersection between language and social experience in the cityscape of L.A. In this way, it is analytically possible to not only approach the habituation and reproduction of specific deictic fields as indexical of the ways that speakers parse the city, but also to demonstrate the ways in which key moments in the history of the city have shaped the emergence and meaning of those fields.

Keywords: deixis; semiotics; linguistic anthropology; East Los Angeles; Mexican Americans

1. Introduction

Ana and I would sit in her living room chatting for hours about her experiences growing up and living in Los Angeles – now in her sixties, her knowledge of the geographical and cultural landscape of the area is extraordinary, filled with seemingly unending memories and experiences woven into the fabric of the city. Ana's L.A. is not the one typically imagined by outsiders – there are no red carpets here and the beach is a distant construct – but her L.A. is one that is recognizable to thousands of Mexican Americans born and raised in Southern California at mid-century as members of the baby boomer generation. This was a time in California's history in which the trickling effects segregationist policies and practices had started to shift and possibilities for class mobility and attendant residential mobility, particularly for those returning from the war, began to emerge in new ways. Indeed, it was in the wake of WWII that that many Mexican Americans in L.A. began to formulate new and robust senses of identity (Sánchez, 1993) – the designation of *Mexican American, born and raised* became a source of profound social and personal importance for many of Ana's generation. The year 2020 marked a key milestone for people born in 1955, Ana's birth year, as they began the transition into retirement at the age of 65.

Ana's parents were raised in and around East L.A. and had settled in the predominantly Latino neighborhood of Boyle Heights in the 1950s after they met as teenagers and formed an unlikely union. Ana's mother was born in Mexico and was brought to California at the age of 5 to be raised by her grandmother and extended family who settled in the area as members of the Bracero Program, an

initiative structured to supply agricultural workers from Mexico to the U.S. during WWII (Calavita, 1992). As a teenager, Ana's mother was, in her words, *a hardcore Pachuca*, part of the Mexican American subculture of the 1940s and 50s most recognizable by their zoot suits, with women actively thwarting the rigid gender expectations of the time by wearing stylish men's pants and appearing in public with their male counterparts (Ramírez, 2009). Her father was a varsity letterman in high school and had gone on to earn a B.A. in child psychology at East Los Angeles College in 1951, but was unable to secure employment in that sector – *he was before his time – who was gonna hire a Latino child psychologist?* Ana would often ask. After years of simmering tension with her father, Ana's mother picked up the three children and moved them to Montebello when Ana was 8, a city east of East L.A. Ana's father spent the rest of his working days as an upholsterer before he passed away at the age of 38 from complications due to alcoholism.

In 1973 when Ana was 18 years old, the slow burn of a rocky childhood and adolescence brought her to leave her mother's home in Montebello, and she spent a short time in San Francisco *trying out the hippie life*, where she met the father of her first child. When their relationship dissolved, she returned home to L.A. and gave birth, then moved to Arizona shortly thereafter with her son to live with a friend. In 1976, after she and her young son had moved back to East L.A., Ana recalled one late afternoon when she climbed into her *beat up old VW Bug*, a source of freedom and peace for her in the complex car culture of L.A., and began to drive. Ana, now 21 years old, drove her Bug for travel, but also for meditation – from East L.A., she followed Beverly Boulevard going east. That late afternoon, Ana drove further than she had normally gone, going past Norwalk Boulevard, and she came upon the pine-lined streets of the old part of Whittier, a former Quaker colony that experienced great success in agriculture and oil at the turn of

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the 20th century, with handsome historic homes that hugged the winding streets.

Driving among the century-old trees of Beverly Boulevard and up to scenic Turnbull Canyon Road, Ana had an epiphany: *it was a beautiful neighborhood, it was the Yellow Brick Road, it was Shangri-La and I said to myself, "one day I'm gonna live here because it would mean that I arrived – I got out of 'the neighborhood'"* – for Ana, upward mobility and independence had been long associated with “getting out” of East L.A. and now, this formative experience concretely associated critical class mobility with going east. Shortly thereafter, Ana landed a job at the Public Services Office in East L.A. where she worked then eventually met the father of her second child at her favorite café while on lunch break. Ana set her dreams of moving to Whittier aside as she settled with her new partner in the distant suburbs of the Pomona Valley situated in the shadow of the San Bernardino Mountains, far away from family and friends in and around East L.A. While there, she gave birth to her second child in 1987, but over time the relationship with her partner slowly soured. Ana’s growing discomfort with her status as a *domestic engineer* had come to a head – *what about burning the bra and women’s lib and all that shit?* – and she rounded up her friends one afternoon to move all her belongings and the children back to Montebello with her *comadre*, the godmother of her children. Ana was able to reinstate her job at the Public Services Office in East L.A. in 1990, and over the next few months, she saved up enough money to finally move to Whittier with her children.

By 2008, the year Ana and I first met, she calculated that she had moved 9 times over the course of her life in a largely eastward direction, with forays back into East L.A. and surrounding areas in times of challenge to get support from family and friends. For her, moving was a way to begin again, to start anew, and to call her own shots: “for me, it was an exciting idea to move, it was always hopeful,” Ana would tell me. When we started work on this project, Ana and I were neighbors on the same sleepy street in Old Town Whittier, decidedly east of East L.A. – following the main thoroughfare of Whittier Boulevard (or Beverly Boulevard, which runs adjacently), Ana’s new home was situated little more than 10 miles from her childhood home in Boyle Heights. While a seemingly insignificant distance on the map, this eastward trajectory carried with it the symbolic weight of a profound social transformation for Ana, indexing the process of *moving out and moving up* and of *getting out of 'the neighborhood'*. While Ana still worked in East L.A. at the Department of Public Social Services, her mid-size Depression-era home was the material embodiment of *living the dream* – this was the essence of “the good life” she had envisioned on that transformative late afternoon drive back in 1976 – painted in pristine mission white, surrounded by a manicured front lawn, and a jet-black Volvo with leather seats parked in the spotless driveway. Every month, when the rent and car payments came due, Ana was reminded simultaneously of her “move up,” but also of the precarious nature of her newfound status.

2. Approach

The stories and data explored in this project represent concerted ethnographic efforts over the course of the spring and summer of 2008 where I spent time with Ana as a friend and a linguistic anthropologist. Before the project began, Ana and I had met as neighbors at a few backyard barbecues – getting to know her at these neighborly events, it was immediately apparent that she

had extraordinary insight into a part of L.A. that was unknown to many, even other native Angelenos like me – I was, after all a *white chick from a different time and place*, as she would often remind me. Ana’s story is one that sheds light on the experiences of many Mexican Americans who came of age at a critical time of a transitioning L.A. and the slow move of people who had been, up until mid-century, relegated largely in and around racially and socioeconomically segregated parts of L.A. Ana and I initially conceptualized of the project together with a relatively narrow focus on the process by which parents of the era often chose to not teach their children Spanish as a technique to increase their “assimilability” into imagined forms of U.S. culture (Hayes-Bautista, 2017) – indeed, Ana’s experience followed this trajectory as she considered herself to be largely monolingual in English “with a little sprinkle here and there sometimes in Spanish.”

As we connected and talked in greater depth, the project quickly became far more complex as the foundations of Ana’s social experience unfolded. During our project-focused work together, I employed the traditional tools of ethnography: audio recording, fieldnotes, analytical observations, and posing relevant questions. Most sessions were carried out at her home in the form of open-ended conversational interviews, usually over chips and salsa, and we conducted excursions into L.A. where she drove her black Volvo with the leather seats and narrated aspects of her experience of the city, identifying evocative geographical sites, streets, stores, neighborhoods, and passageways in a stream-of-consciousness format. Not all our sessions were recorded, as I also collected data as a participant observer as we spent time together as she prepared for barbecues, held yard sales, and carried out spring cleanings. Over the course of our time together for this project, Ana introduced me to some of her friends who had similar experiences growing up in L.A. – overall, I made contact with and spoke to or interviewed 7 additional participants who had similar experiences as Ana, but in the end, Ana emerged as the primary participant. This analysis primarily draws insights from Ana, and so it is thus an ethnography of a single person, but it has been informed by the conversations and research on the experiences of others with similar backgrounds, shedding light on the ways in which language, history, and geography intersect for many Mexican Americans who came of age around the same time as Ana in Los Angeles.

To date, there have been a number of extraordinary analyses on the experiences of Mexican Americans of Ana’s generation in L.A., including Rojas’ (1991) autoethnographic analysis of the ways in which the phenomenological experience of architecture shapes neighborhood life in East L.A. and Acuña’s (1995) treatment of Chicano and Latino experiences in the city in the contested political space of the 20th century. Mendoza-Denton’s (2008) analysis of gang girls in Northern California and Davidson’s (2007) analysis of systems of deixis in Germany are representative models for the genre of linguistic anthropological writing offered here as well. This analysis interrogates the ways in which a special category of language, *deixis*, carries extraordinary power to reveal aspects of the ways in which people understand their lived experiences through language.

3. Narrative Framings

Ana’s developed sense of the world and immediacy of analysis during our work together were enabled by powerful narrative frameworks that informed her interpretive experience. On several occasions, when asked about the ways she preferred to refer to herself, Ana immediately identified that she considered herself

to be *Mexican American, born and raised*, and did not find the term *Chicana* to be fully applicable to her due to the political implications of the term in her mind. Indeed, many Mexican Americans of Ana's generation in L.A. experienced extraordinary pressures to assimilate and they were called upon to make socially charged choices about their identities on many fronts at an early age – the results of these pressures in everyday practices often manifested in a multi-stepped system of differentiation and association as part of the assimilation process: in distancing themselves from newly arrived persons from Mexico and in placing great emphasis the fact that they were born and raised in America, many who came of age in the same era in L.A. adopted the outward-facing self-referent of “Mexican American,” or even “Spanish” at some point in their lives (Avila, 2004:54). That said, on a number of occasions during our time together, Ana positively aligned with the missions, goals, practices, and philosophies that motivated the *Brown Berets* and the rallying cry of *Viva la Raza* “long live the people,” both associated with the Chicano movement of the 1960s and 70s (Alaniz & Cornish, 2008), signaling a complex tapestry of connections around questions of identity and political affiliation for her over the years. To be sure, Ana's experience of L.A. represents a key moment in the tumultuous history of the city in the aftermath of WWII, where she and other Mexican Americans experienced new possibilities for mobility, but also charged forms of racism and exclusion in the formative years of their childhoods. Ana's generation bore witness to the “ESL kids being shipped out way in the boonies in tiny trailers at school and called *pepperbellies* and *wetbacks* by the blue-eyed, blond-haired kids at school” and they would come to pronounce their names in anglicized ways modeled by their white teachers, “so instead of Pérez, we were *Pear-res*, and Martínez, we were *Martin-es* and we didn't know any different because they were our teachers,” Ana would recall. Members of Ana's generation were also sometimes labeled negatively as *pochos*, “Americanized Mexicans,” and were often accused of speaking “bad Spanish” and of having “lost their culture” by some who were natively competent in the language (see also: Field, 1994). This was a point which Ana visited many times during our time together, vividly recalling aunts sitting with her mother in the kitchen speaking in rapid Spanish and chastising her responses in English with great disdain. Ana often evocatively described her experience growing up in postwar L.A. as between two worlds: *I had one foot in the white world and one foot in the Mexican world*, underscoring the deep ambivalence that emerged from the feeling of only partially belonging simultaneously to two seemingly distinct cultural systems in her formative years. This process has had long-lasting impacts on the ways in which many of Ana's generation have constructed their identities, have moved throughout the city, and the ways in which these systems are subsequently reflected in language.

In discourse and everyday talk, Ana's narrative structuration of the city emerged as powerfully arranged along the lines of race and class that presented in the ways in which she set up narrative framings to identify relevant social boundaries. During a particularly revealing conversation one late afternoon, the famous Olvera Street emerged as a topic of discussion. Olvera Street is an ideologically contested place: for tourists, it is framed an authentic representation of “classic Los Angeles,” but for many locals it is a transplant from a different time and place, hardly recognizable as everyday lived L.A. (Estrada, 1999). Ana recounted traveling from her home in Whittier to meet a friend at a restaurant somewhere in *El Pueblo*. As she sat at the table catching up over iced tea, her awareness of tourists sitting at the table behind her was gradually

increasing. They were flustered and making a fuss, sliding their menu back and forth at the table and pointing at items – based on their accents, she theorized they must have been from Sweden. Finally, she came to understand that the couple was attempting to decipher what an “enchilada” was and couldn't seem to get the attention of the wait staff to ask. Ana acted out the critical moment when the woman turned to her and uttered in total desperation:

Excerpt 1 – What is this?

01 Excu::se me? Excu:::se me?

02 What is this?

03 What is this “en-chee-lah-dah”?

04 Please help us!

Ana performed the voice of the lost Swede in an a highly enregistered, hyperanglicized “white voice” (Hill, 1995; Alim, 2005) – complete with rounded vowels, nasalization, high-pitch, fluctuating prosody, and exaggerated upward intonation – key features she regularly invoked in the linguistic production of “clueless whites.” Ana reported that she glanced at the menu to try to help the woman, she made a surprising discovery:

Excerpt 2 – My menu and her menu

01 Well, trip out on *this* [1]

02 *My menu* [2] said *ten* [3] dollars

03 And *her menu* [2] said *fourteen* [3]

04 **For the same plate**

05 The *white people* [4] got the *expensive menu* [5]

06 And the *local* [4] got the *cheaper menu* [5]

07 What's up with *that* [1]?

In recounting the experience, Ana constructed the narrative framework that reflected her understanding of the situation, ordering the elements associated with each of the relevant players at two distinct levels: the lower level emerged from the structural interactions between the textual elements in her story, and the higher level was informed by the semiotic significance of these elements in social life.

At the lower level, the text itself reveals a metrically structured interaction of elements – here, *my menu/her menu* [2]; *ten/fourteen* [3]; *local/white people* [4]; *cheaper menu/expensive menu* [5], interact structurally in the text to generate a world that is bifurcated along several key dimensions in the narrative frame. This highly productive narrative framing is both structured and stylized, bracketed foremostly by the terms: *this* and *that* [1] to begin and end the framing of the story, which serve the function of pointing to key features in discourse (Fillmore, 1997). At a higher level, the structuration and interaction of elements in Ana's story provide critical insight into her narrative construction of the social world and demonstrate that it is parsed along several socially relevant dimensions. Ana's narrative functions as a window into the structuration of systems of social differentiation that work together to construct categories of high sociocultural value in discourse. Such a process also extends to a further system in which elements are tied together *indexically*, naturalizing their co-occurrence in narrative – this formula creates a highly productive system through which certain terms are bundled in discourse – for Ana, “white,” “foreign,” and “expensive” are linked and “Mexican American,” “local,” and “cheap” undergo a corresponding bundling (Silverstein, 2003). These elements were ubiquitously present throughout Ana's narrative framing of her experience of the social world in L.A., highlighting an exquisitely attuned interpretation and ordering of elements in the

[Object 1]
(Ego)

[Object 2]

Figure 1. Spatial deixis, neutral form.

world. It is of importance to note that the semiotic value of the elements of the narrative link up to factors of high sociocultural value for Ana – this is particularly apparent in the contrastive pairing found in *local/white people*, which emerged as a highly evocative and often cited framework in Ana's narrative framing of the geographical and social space of L.A.

4. On the Role of Deixis

As Excerpt 2 demonstrates, language generally and narrative framing specifically are key mechanisms through which to understand the ways in which a given speaker parses their social world. For Ana, many of her narrative systems were organized explicitly along the lines of race and class, which functioned as highly productive and generative categories in the framing and interpretation of social life. However, there were other forms of language that were still highly productive but less immediately available to analysis as they had not emerged as direct objects of discourse. During the course of our work together, it became clear that Ana's narrative framing of the cityscape carried with it a category of language that revealed critical information about the way in which she organized social space and her experience of the city, a special linguistic category called *deixis*. Deixis is, at its core, a system of pointing, or a way in which referents are constructed contextually in talk (Levinson, 2006). There are three general categories of deixis which include *spatial deixis* (e.g., here, there), *temporal deixis* (e.g., now, then) and *person deixis* (e.g., me, you) – work on deictic categories has demonstrated that these systems are based largely on the material world but are necessarily modified by the conditions of their use, giving deictic categories the status of *shifters* (Jacobson, 1957; Silverstein, 1976).

In Figure 1, a simple example of spatial deixis is outlined. If we establish a spatial field and identify a person in the field, “Ego,” this person might refer to Object 1 as being “here,” while Object 2 might be “there,” based primarily on spatial proximity to the object in question. If the person were to move closer to Object 2, this labeling (of *here* versus *there*) would predictably switch – this process illustrates the ways in which the use of the deictic term *shifts* based on the contextual factor of spatial proximity.

While there is a near universality of deictic categories across linguistic and cultural fora, anthropological work has demonstrated that the local conditions through which deictic systems emerge differ across linguistic and cultural spectra characterized by “different coordinate systems, different principles for constructing such coordinate systems, yielding different categorizations of ‘same’ and ‘different’ across spatial scenes” (Levinson, 2003:19). William Hanks' (2005) analysis of deictic categories has further demonstrated the ways in which these foundational systems can be even more complexly constructed when considering the details of highly local forms of referential systems as well, highlighting the malleability and socially specific foundations of these systems across contexts. So, while there is a near universality of some form of deixis across cultural and linguistic contexts, the conditions of these uses may differ significantly across these contexts.

West L.A.
[Restaurant A] | (Ego)

East L.A.
[Restaurant B]

Figure 2 . Spatial deixis, socially charged form.

In this way, as an analytical category, deictic systems carry the potential to reveal the ways that a given speaker might organize aspects of the outside world in talk. Deictic categories are special in that, while shaped by cultural conditions, they are not typically the source or target of direct metalinguistic commentary or explicit ideological work by speakers – Hanks refers to deictic categories as being formed by “tacit” knowledge, which may not necessarily be subject to direct ideological work in the same way as other sociological categories (2005:193). In considering these observations, an examination of systems of deixis provides a way to interrogate the intersection of the material world and the experience of it through language, providing a potential window into the ways in which people parse the world in ways that may be outside of explicit or conscious ideological work. Despite the fact that deictic categories are often taken for granted element of language, they carry the potential to reveal important aspects of the ways in which speakers organize and understand aspects of the world in their minds – this is particularly true in an ideologically charged place like Los Angeles where the landscape is saturated with identity information linked to questions of placemaking and provenance – *places where we tread* and *places where they tread* constitute powerful schemas through which people organize and arrange aspects of their social world. Following Hanks' analysis that systems of deixis may be profoundly shaped by social conditions, it is possible to explore the seemingly paradoxical situation through which spatial proximity alone may not be the only calculation used in deriving meaning in relation to a deictic referent. These alignments function to locate the *deictic origo* (I, here, now) (Bühler [1934] 1990), referring to the real and imagined locus of a speaker at the time of a given utterance. An example based on work with Ana, illustrated in Figure 2, demonstrates the ways in which this dynamic can present, where the | represents an imaginary boundary that separates West L.A. from East L.A.

For Ana, in the socially charged space of L.A., longstanding social dynamics had indexically associated West L.A. with affluence and whiteness (they), while East L.A. had been associated in her mind with working classness and Latinness (we), which is also corroborated in circulating forms of popular discourse and even in demographic trends of the city. Because of these longstanding social dynamics, during driving excursions especially, Ana would often refer to objects such as Restaurant A on the Westside (with all its entailments) using the *distal* (far) spatial deictic term *there* emergent from a spatial and social origo of East L.A. (I, here, now) from which she reckoned the world. Hanks refers to these systems as derived from an *interactionist structure*, which asserts that “any deictic field is already part of an unfolding social process” and is predicated foundationally on mutual knowledge and epistemic orientations shared among speakers and interlocutors (2005:206). In this way, the choice of the distal deictic term *there* or the proximal term *here* to refer to objects in socially saturated space carries messages about the interpretative and narrative structuration of the world, and the ways in which elements in narrative are constructed in relation to the real or imagined origo of the Ego. Clear cases where this system might differ might include instances of a person giving directions or meeting someone at an exact location, e.g.: “I'm *here* (standing at) at Restaurant A,” although this may have flexibility as well.

Complimentarily, work by Davidson (2007) in the context of Berlin demonstrates the ways in which systems of deixis carry the potential to reveal complex and multifaceted information such as political and ideological positions taken up by speakers as they locate themselves in geographical, temporal, and social landscapes. The process by which a given referential system can reveal other aspects of a speaker's social experience and positionality has been discussed as *indirect indexicality* in the linguistic anthropological literature (Hill, 1993, 1995, 1998, 2005; Ochs, 1990). This process is one by which elements of speech can *index* or *point to* another aspect of the speaking person's moral or social position in discourse. In the domain of deixis again, significant attention has been paid to the ways in which indirect indexicality figures in the use of honorifics, which are forms of *social deixis* in which participants socially orient to one another in a given scene – some examples include the *tu* versus *vous* second person pronoun referent, which serve the function of pointing to the social positions of the speaker and interlocutor in relation to one another in discourse (see: Agha, 1994; Cook, 1998; Duranti, 1981; Levinson, 1977). The application of the concept of indirect indexicality can be extended to apply variously to other deictic categories, such as spatial deixis (Nunburg, 1993). When extended to the spatial context, such schemes may be understood through the lens of *moral geographies* that carry the potential to reveal epistemological positions of speakers as these are laminated onto the physical landscape in narrative (Hill, 1995; Basso, 1996). Modan (2007) has productively expanded on these foundations to demonstrate the ways in which these moral geographies can become shared by community members and form the foundations through which local understandings of a landscape are generated and negotiated in discourse. While this analysis focuses primarily on spatial deixis, other forms of deixis are of profound analytical importance as well.

5. The Polynucleation of Los Angeles

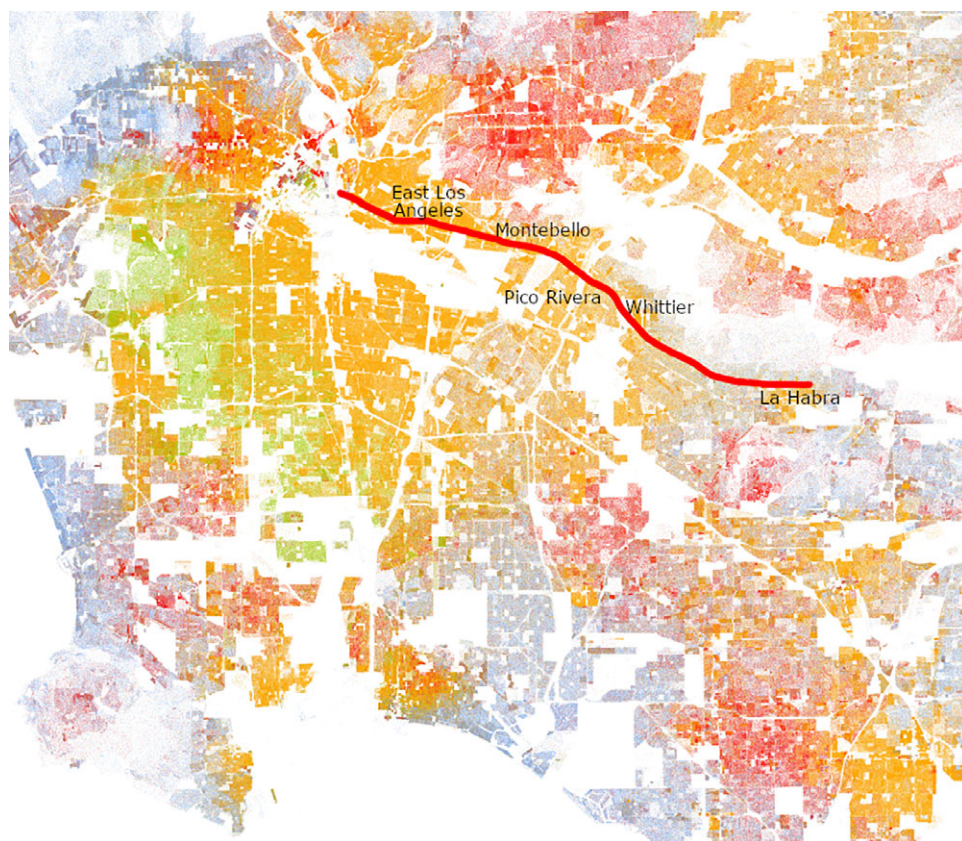
To understand the ways in which fields of deixis may be used by speakers like Ana who grew up in East L.A. at mid-century, it is instructive to examine the events and forces relevant to uncovering the material conditions that shaped her experience of the city not only at micro levels, but at macro levels as well. To be sure, systems of deixis are shaped, at least in part, by the material conditions of a given landscape, and these systems may subsequently undergo social and semiotic work by individuals and communities as they orient to the value and interpretative schemes of these in context (Modan, 2007). This section will broadly outline some key categories of importance to Mexican Americans who came of age in and around mid-century East L.A. – this analysis is of course, incomplete, but it can begin to shed light on the complex processes in history that have shaped people's experiences of their city and subsequently, the ways in which language is used to make sense of this experience.

Los Angeles has always been somewhat of a bricolage of variously fitting parts – in 1968, Lewis Mumford (1968) lamented the sprawl starting to take hold in Los Angeles, predicting potentially dystopic social conditions that could emerge from imbalances in the distribution of resources and land across the city. Contemporary analysts of L.A. will invariably point to the profound effects of early housing policies, real estate and lending programs, and processes of incorporation in Los Angeles as powerful forces in shaping the physical and social dynamics of the city and its people, concentrating social enclaves often split along class and racial lines in direct and indirect ways (Soja & Wolff, 1989).

Sociologist Mark Gottdiener has described the social and spatial situation in Los Angeles as having been produced in large part by the process of *polynucleation* through which “the production of space has occurred in the main not because of economic processes alone but, more specifically, because of a joint state-real estate sector articulation that forms the leading edge of spatial transformations” (2010:241). Even today, any tourist traveling through Los Angeles will be struck by the amazing rapidity by which the social landscape changes along class and racial lines, a result of these early processes.

Interrogating the reasons for and the effects of the polynucleation of Los Angeles leads inevitably to an exploration of the policies and politics of housing that have shaped the lives of millions of citizens in L.A., including the deeply impactful process through which citizens were able to (or not) obtain home loans in the wake of the New Deal after the Great Depression. Scholars point to the ways in which home loan policies relied heavily on local real estate agents to determine “at risk” areas in the process of distributing home loans, by drawing lines on maps in outlining “neighborhood grades” through the process of *redlining*, with those in “undesirable” areas (often identified as those areas with “mixed” groups, with citizens of color, and/or with the socioeconomically disadvantaged) often unable to secure home loans, thereby reinforcing deeply rooted systems of disadvantage along class and racial lines (Reft, 2017). Exploring the ideologies, private interests, and policies that shaped Los Angeles in the early years of the 20th century provides a basis for understanding the material conditions through which the citizens of L.A. were situated and subsequently experienced the cityscape (Davis, 1992; Diaz, 2005). Despite the eventual dispersal of working-class whites from areas adjacent to the rail-yards and ports as the century wore on, generations of working-class Mexican Americans (and other racialized populations) often did not enjoy the same kind of free movement across the cityscape. Indeed, Avila writes that redlining was a key process that limited movement for many and emerged as a key mechanism through which racial and socioeconomic homogeneity emerged as a “precondition of homeownership,” and “those neighborhoods [such as Boyle Heights] that sustained the region's heterosocial public life throughout the 1930s and early 1940s” were targeted as “undesirable” through the redlining process (2004:35). While these of course were not the only contributing factors in the shaping of L.A., they emerge as particularly instructive in understanding the ways in which some areas in L.A. became increasingly racially and socioeconomically segregated as the century wore on and also constrained forms of movement for some citizens, such as Mexican Americans who were concentrated in certain regions around East Los Angeles.

Indeed, in the shadow of WWII, private interests often dictated the politics and policies of cities in Los Angeles. At a more granular level, the dynamics that contributed to the polynucleation of L.A., hinged on complimentary discourses of “slow growth,” which often discouraged the building of affordable housing and privatized real-estate interests, and “minimal city” politics that were characterized by the push to seek as little outside taxation as possible (Le Goix, 2006) – together, these complimentary processes were flattened into the philosophy of “self-sufficiency” and were exacerbated by discriminatory lending policies and cycles of dis-possession that propagated among the citizens of L.A. along racial and socioeconomic lines (Davis, 1992). On one side of the equation in L.A. were planned cities that had strong political representation at the local level and were able to leverage those interests in the shaping of their cities. Lakewood, just to take one example, was



Map 1. Screen capture of the demographic distribution of persons in Greater Los Angeles by race, Image Copyright, 2013, Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service, Rector and Visitors of the University of Virginia (Dustin A. Cable, creator; 2010). Hispanic population: Yellow; Black population: Green; Asian population: Red; White population: Blue. City names and the red line representing Whittier Boulevard have been added by the author. The length of Whittier Boulevard represented here stretches from the L.A. River to Harbor Boulevard in La Habra.

deemed to be the “City of Tomorrow Today,” and was characterized as a “planned, post-World War II community [. . .] built with the hope and the promise inherent in the cultural ethos of the 1950s” (Brill, 1996:99). According to Mike Davis, these areas were often conceptualized and built in the light of the suburban fantasy envisioned by their planners, who sought “self-sufficiency” above all else, driven often by the monetary benefits of being exempt from taxation for public works in the urban center and other benefits linked to controlling land-use policies and zoning (1992:165). Avila writes pointedly that while suburban areas such as Lakewood enjoyed the fruits of powerful political representation at the local level, unincorporated places like East L.A. and other areas that were redlined in the wake of the Great Depression, experienced widening gaps in access and mobility, pointing out that, “lacking the advantages of self-determination and wholly dependent on an unresponsive county burdened with administrative responsibilities elsewhere [. . .] the citizens of East Los Angeles struggled to remedy the deteriorating quality of life in their community” (2004:54). During the 1950s and 60s, citizens in East L.A. experienced a series of profound assaults from the county with the installation of a tangle of freeways that “demolish[ed] thousands of homes and fractur[ed] dozens of diverse neighborhoods” (Anderson, 2008:1152), and in the building of “prisons and industrial waste sites that other communities successfully resisted” (Avila, 2004:52).

These processes had profound effects on the demographic trends in Los Angeles that impacted the lives of millions of people in the area. Indeed, while some cities that flanked East L.A. were

often difficult to move into due to powerful local politics and other processes such as exclusionary lending policies, other cities offered more flexibility for a burgeoning middle class in postwar L.A. Avila writes that this was particularly true for Mexican Americans who had returned from WWII with a newfound sense of patriotism and a desire for a real slice of the “American Dream” – some areas east of East L.A., such as Pico Rivera, “cradled a Chicano middle class during the postwar period while communities such as Lakewood tolerated those families of Mexican descent who willingly identified themselves as ‘Spanish’” (2004:52). These processes, and many others, which took place over half a century ago, can still be seen in the demographic trends of the city – Map 1, based on demographic data collected in 2010, demonstrates in striking detail the ways in which Los Angeles continues to be racially segregated in many ways, with yellow representing the “Hispanic” population. The length of Whittier Boulevard is highlighted in red and is flanked by the cities of East Los Angeles, Montebello, Pico Rivera, and Whittier that are of importance to this analysis. Notably, within recent years, the pattern of racial and socioeconomic homogeneity found in the neighborhoods of Los Angeles has, according to some analyses, softened somewhat with neighborhoods trending toward more diversity (Holloway, Wright & Ellis, 2012).

Indeed, the politics and processes undergirding the polynucleation of Los Angeles have operated as key forces that have given shape to the experience and conceptualization of space by residents as well as ideas and possibilities for mobility across the cityscape. People that lived in working-class areas, such as in East Los

Angeles, were able to traverse certain spaces and places in the cityscape of L.A. – paths of mobility were predicated on the structural limits of where people could live, work, and play, serving to define daily practices, ideas, and language through which to reckon and make sense of their lifeworlds.

It is in considering these processes that Ana's framing of her world in narrative took on new texture and dimension. In an early interview, dominant and embodied schemes for "places and spaces for Mexican Americans to tread" was articulated by Ana with great clarity, underscoring the implicit understanding that possibilities for upward mobility were contained in the concept of "moving east" from East L.A. Here, Ana talks about her experience living in Montebello in the 1960s and the trajectory of Mexican Americans eastward out of East L.A., making reference to a friend who had a similar experience:

Excerpt 3 – Ana on the movement east out of East L.A.

- 01 And I was the sprinkle
 02 But I was Mexican American
 03 I was born **here**
 04 But they gave me a time
 05 Like him in Montebello
 06 Had friends
 07 Their parents wanted a better life
 08 *So they moved further east*
 09 *From East L.A. to Montebello to Whittier*

Ana's discursive framing of the move from East L.A. to eastern cities was one that transcended individual choice, as it was shaped critically by the material conditions that had shaped possibilities for her life in the city. The idea of "moving out and moving up" by moving east has also been discussed by Rojas as "jumping," the process whereby as people "move out of East Los Angeles they generally move eastward to better, affordable housing and with them move all the networks of people" giving rise to "Mexicanized" suburban communities (1991:36). In considering these dynamics, it becomes clear that the process of polynucleation funneled Mexican Americans living in East L.A. into cities that flanked the central corridor in and around Whittier Boulevard to the east and this move had profound impacts on the conceptualization and experience of the cityscape for speakers like Ana. As Mexican Americans living in East Los Angeles after the war conceptualized the potential path of movement, the specific realities of the ways that they related to the socio-spatial framework of organization were realized through the process of *emplacement*, which "attends to the specific embodied conditions that underlie the experiences of place" (Englund, 2002:277). In the case of Mexican Americans living in East Los Angeles in the 1950s and 1960s, the central thoroughfare that enabled literal and metaphorical movement out of East L.A. was Whittier Boulevard, which became an evocative, semiotically loaded object critical to the experience of emplacement. This gave shape and texture to emergent deictic fields and the ways in which Mexican Americans, particularly those who were part of the emerging middle class after the war, talked about and experienced the city.

6. The Development of Whittier Boulevard as a Semiotic Center

In 1965, Thee Midnights released the song, "Whittier Boulevard," which was an homage to L.A. cruising culture, mixing

elements of surf guitars and a call to the streets: "Let's take a trip down Whittier Boulevard!" accompanied by a quintessential Mexican *grito* 'shout,' "Arriba! Arriba!" (Molina, [2007] 2017). For Mexican Americans in East L.A., to cruise down Whittier Boulevard was a Friday night institution, as proud owners of low-riders rolled low and slow showing off their cars, a practice which continues today (Del Barco, 2018; Ides, 2009). Scott Gold, the author of the article "East L.A. Gets a Long Overdue Facelift" published in the L.A. Times in 2008, points out that the Boulevard was a central part of life for young people in the 1960s, particularly those in the "cruising scene" noting that "In 1965, cruisers, low-riders, and brown-is-beautiful pioneers [. . .] cemented Whittier Boulevard itself as a defining pathway in the development of Latino Los Angeles." Whittier Boulevard not only provided a space of sociality for young people in East L.A., but it was also semiotically constructed as a path through the urban landscape that was linked to prosperity and upward mobility in that it, along with other adjacent routes such as Beverly Boulevard, represented the material path out of East Los Angeles to eastern cities. Roth has also explored the value of Whittier Boulevard in L.A. for Mexican Americans writing that, "Mexican American identity and the cultural landscape created by transportation infrastructure on the east side" was crystallized in the wake of "imperious highway policies of the 1920s" (2004:732). In working with Ana, when setting off for any driving tour of L.A., no matter where we were going, Whittier Boulevard was the thoroughfare that would lead us to our destinations.

So ubiquitous was the presence of Whittier Boulevard in the experiences, practices, and language of Mexican Americans in East L.A. that Gold's article drew several hundred comments from the community. Many Mexican Americans of Ana's generation were inspired to contribute recollections of their own experiences and reflections of the Boulevard:

Excerpt 4 – Fox East LA on Whittier Boulevard in East Los Angeles

I grew up in East L A and Whittier Blvd. was our Mecca. It was our own parade route of every weekend. You didn't need much money to have fun. Most of us were poor and didn't know it. Those who did have money invested it in their rides. But we were all rich because we believed in our brotherhood, carnalismo, chicano power, viva la raza, viva la causa, brown is beautiful, unity, and community. We were all brown berets, activists, cruisers, and low-riders. Unfortunately, newer generations lack that.

Fox East LA's comment highlights the ways in which residents developed orientations to Whittier Boulevard that were in dialogue with a growing sense of social restlessness – cruising culture in particular emerged as a site of resistance for many (Ides, 2009). Another contributor to the article points out the significance of the Boulevard in her daily activities as a young person in East L.A., evoking powerful sense memories of place:

Excerpt 5 – Mercedes on Whittier Boulevard in East Los Angeles

Dotty Deans, Stan's Drive-In, Atlantic Bowling Alley – 'member'? We lived two block off of Whittier Blvd; we move into this neighborhood (early 50's). It's great that things are going to look better, but the store owners also have to make an effort to improve their own locations. I remember going to El Gallo Bakery on Cesar Chavez on Thanksgiving at 5 a.m. to stand in line for their bollios

and pan dulce, meeting people in line who lived in La Habra, La Verne, etc. to buy their bread. One man said “You can take a person out of ELA, but you can’t take ELA out of the person.” So true.

These comments are a snapshot into the ways in which Whittier Boulevard, a hub of cruising and youth culture in L.A., was oriented to as an object of high semiotic value for many, including Ana. It is important to note here that Whittier Boulevard did not simply “appear on the scene” as a prefabricated semiotic entity that demanded collective attention, but its significance was developed by the collective action and orientation, both material and ideological, of people over time, giving rise to its status as an *emplaced* object. Critically, the structural processes that undergirded the cityscape of L.A., provided a material framework through which residents semiotically loaded the objects in their world, predicated in part on the historical conditions that shaped the material and social surround. This point follows Marshall Sahlins’ position that asserts that the formations of symbols are historically situated, whereby “symbols are symptoms, direct or mystified, of the true force of things” (1981:7). In this way, symbols are produced by the historical conditions in which they are situated – so too, Whittier Boulevard emerged as a symbol of the “true force of things” to which Mexican Americans in East L.A. oriented in the social world of mid-century L.A.

7. The Linguistic Structuration of the City

As articulated above, the forces of relevance to Ana’s life were arranged powerfully along the lines of race and class – as a continuous theme throughout our work together, Ana’s sense of the city was predicated in large part on her feeling caught between two worlds, with *one foot in the white world and one foot in the Mexican world*. Such conceptualizations played heavily in her narrative structuration of the world, often realized through the strategic use of *voice*, which enabled her to represent the multiple sites of tension between imagined speakers and their motivations in narrative (see also: Agha, 2005). As Bakhtin writes, “language is not an abstract system of normative forms but rather a concrete heteroglot conception of the world [. . .] each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived a socially charged life” (2004:293). It is in this way that narrative becomes imbued with an understanding of the world, “tasting of the contexts of its life,” and for Ana, this was constructed in part through the use of semiotically loaded deictic categories. The following section draws from a particularly productive conversation with Ana on her observations and experiences of the city, the changes she had observed over time, and the ways in which she understood the construction of her own identity as “caught between worlds” in the complex cityscape of L.A.

To begin, Ana narrates her interpretation of the forces shaping Los Angeles, tapping into several extraordinarily productive tools in narrative to deliver observations of the nature of and the reasons for the distribution of people across the cityscape:

Excerpt 6: Ana constructs her theory of the social landscape

01 You know, let’s face it
02 It’s the Whiteman
03 The Whiteman did that shit years and years ago

Whiteman Voicing Frame

04 What we gotta do with the Russians
05 Gotta do with the Mexicans

06 Gotta do with the Jews
07 Who’s got more money?
08 We’ll stick them **over here**
09 Oh you know what?
10 *They’ll be from the other side of the tracks*
11 *We’ll stick ‘em way out in the boonies with all the industry*

Ana’s narrative sheds critical light on her theory of the world, and a key to understanding this is an examination of both shifts in narrative frame through the invocation of the channeled voice of the “Whiteman,” as well as evocative and semiotically rich deictic terms. Ana’s use of voice in this narrative also serves the function of shifting frames through which to construct a landscape arranged along class and racial lines.

Ana’s construction of space is achieved at the most basic level in the use of the deictic term, *over here* in line 08, which can be understood as referring to East Los Angeles, particularly areas adjacent to the Southern Pacific Railroad where Mexican, Mexican American, Jewish, and Russian populations were historically concentrated to find work (Avila, 2004). In this narrative framing, Ana characterizes East L.A. and other areas where “Mexicans and Mexican Americans tread” as “the other side of the tracks” and “way out in the boonies” in lines 10 and 11, which imagines an *origo outside* of East L.A. through which to understand the channeled voice in the narrative. Taken within its narrative context, this deictic framing serves the function of animating the imagined intentions and thoughts of the white planners of the city, further substantiated by content in lines 04–06, which asserts direct and intentional manipulation of the cityscape by white planners, framed as if looking down onto the cityscape and its people in omnipotent fashion. While Ana may not have had direct access to the analytics of *redlining* or *polynucleation*, her narrative structuration of the situation through the use of this evocative construction points to a deep and embodied sense of the process. It is in this way that Ana constructs a semiotically saturated landscape in narrative that illustrates her perceptual system and theory of the cityscape with great clarity.

Later in the conversation, Ana also discusses the ways in which she, as a *Mexican American, born and raised*, came to also differentiate herself from newly arrived persons from Mexico. This emerged as a critically important node in building a narrative that constructed her social experience as in-between:

Excerpt 7: Ana constructs the social landscape

01 I was born **here** in America
02 They wanna be in America
03 *They want the American Dream*

Excerpt 7 provides further insight into the ways that Ana’s understanding of the world has been shaped by her experience of the social and spatial landscape of L.A. In constructing this point in narrative, Ana asserts that she was born *here* in America and thereby has greater potential access to the “American Dream,” indexically bundling these elements together in the narrative frame. Critically, Ana approaches this construction in an oppositional sense, which differentiates her from newly arrived persons from Mexico. This system is also reflected in the following excerpt where the analytic of language serves as a means through which to lay bare discourses of cultural and linguistic forms of differentiation. In this framing, Ana asserts that the status of *Mexican American* is uniquely achieved through not speaking (or refusing to speak) Spanish as she animates an imagined conversation with a

Spanish speaker from Mexico, who questions her identity. In this framing, Ana focuses on aspects of her identity as *Mexican American, born and raised*, with the challenges inherent in being misrecognized:

Excerpt 8: Ana constructs the social landscape

- 01 And they they
 02 They're like
 03 Talk to me in Spanish
 04 And I'm like
 05 What do you mean?
 06 Well, aren't you Mexican?

Excerpt 8 provides a particularly important window into the ways in which Ana understands her social experience through language, seamlessly employing person deictics to indicate shifts in narrative framing through the invocation of voices. A number of key elements emerge in this construction, the first of which is the orientational force of line 02, "They're like," which sets up a situation in which a hypothetical speaker is materialized in narrative. The following line, "Talk to me in Spanish" is constituted through the ways that speakers are differentiated from one another in the context of narrative by virtue of the fact that different "speakers" appear one after another in the narrative frame. Perhaps the most informative line in Excerpt 8 can be found in line 06, where Ana asks the question from the perspective of an imagined speaker from Mexico, "Well, aren't you Mexican?," pointing to the continual sense of misrecognition and in-betweenness experienced by Ana throughout her life. Further on in the narrative, Ana's experience of the cityscape of L.A. is evocatively invoked in relation to her explicitly articulating the feeling of being torn between two worlds:

Excerpt 9: Ana constructs the social landscape

- 01 What I used to know was great and pristine
 02 And I lived in
 03 *One foot in the white world and one foot in the Mexican world*

In Excerpt 9, Ana begins with the critically important construction: "What I used to know," that enables her to position herself as an observer of both the past and the present, giving her the authority to make observations about the state of the world over time. Ana's statement in line 03, which describes her experience as having "one foot in the white world and one foot in the Mexican world," is an evocative representation of the processes that have shaped her life and the tensions inherent in the ways in which she has constructed her identity over time.

Together, these analytics provide critical insight into the ways in which Ana parses her social and spatial world. The concepts and theoretical implications of these analytics help to outline the ways in which history and experience of a cityscape are imbricated in language – in this sense, systems of deixis are a complex set of linguistic resources that shed light on the material, textual, and social contexts, both real and imagined, to which an utterance refers. In the case of East Los Angeles, where the space of the city is a highly contested domain, speakers construct deictic fields that are semiotically loaded with experiential, stance, and epistemic information. A systematic analysis of language in this way sheds light onto the ways that people organize their worlds, which first recognizes that the outside world is a contested domain and secondly understands this domain to be mediated by factors of relevance to social life. In the case of Los Angeles, it is analytically possible to not

only approach the habituation and reproduction of specific deictic fields of ways of the parsing the city in language among speakers, but to demonstrate the ways in which key moments in the history of the city have shaped the emergence of these categories over time and have informed systems of meaning.

8. Conclusion

Examining systems of deixis in narrative as a creative, iterative process helps to outline the process by which propositional content is dialogically linked to elements and conditions in the lifeworlds of speakers. Hanks' development of the concept of *referential practice* provides a robust, anthropologically informed system that can be leveraged in the understanding of deixis-in-action. Practice occupies a special role in the understanding of language as an actionable social process and examining practice with an eye toward the linguistic "locates language in the situated process of verbal communication and foregrounds the articulation of speech with other aspects of the social action" (Hanks, 1990:9). It has been the focus of this analysis to demonstrate that systems of deixis do not occur in a vacuum but are fundamentally shaped by deeply embedded material and social factors and subsequently carry significant semiotic meaning in narrative.

In this way, while the situation in L.A. has shifted such that borders are becoming increasingly porous and neighborhoods are trending toward more diversity, dominant and embodied schemes for "places and spaces for Mexicans and Mexican Americans to tread" remain in Ana's mind. For her, these ideological schemes continue to present themselves in the deictic fields and narrative structurations invoked in day-to-day conversations. It is in this sense that the concept of *practice* bears most heavily, which "can be accounted for only by relating the objective structure defining the social conditions of the production of the habitus" (Bourdieu, 2006:78). Indeed, the conditioned practices of traversing certain spaces in Los Angeles have been shaped by systemic and structural processes, which subsequently shape the ways in which speakers like Ana come to represent those experiences in language. It is in this way that it is possible to observe the emergence of the meaning of deictic systems in context as they are produced by speakers who must negotiate the material, social, and semiotic conditions that shape and give texture to their lives. Importantly, these systems may be "implicit, embedded in actual practices, flexible enough to apply to an open-ended list of changing circumstances" (Hanks, 1990:12). It is in this way that deictic systems are revealed to be critically shaped by the conditions of the speaker's experiences in the world, and given texture through more elaborate semiotic loadings over time.

9. Transcription Conventions

Important part of transcript or direct speech in the body of the analysis

Emphasis, relevant deictic referent

[Number] identifies structural parts of transcript

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