

**Ahearn, Laura M. 2011. *Living Language: An Introduction to Linguistic Anthropology (Primers in Anthropology)*. Malden and Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell. xvi+368 pp. Hb.: £55.00 / €66.00. ISBN: 9781405124409.**

Laura Ahearn's book *Living Language* is intended as primer for undergraduate students and those unfamiliar with linguistic anthropology. The book appears suitable to the chosen audience: the degree of difficulty is somewhere in between the introduction of Salzman and the classic Foley (which is intended for graduates). The number of illustrations and graphs is limited, making the book a text-driven study volume. It covers a great deal of ground in an accessible manner.

The book is divided into three parts with four chapters each, followed by end-notes, references and an index. The first part, entitled 'Language: Some Basic Questions,' introduces the field of anthropological linguistics, doing so through a mix of theory and practical examples. The first chapter explains that words live "socially charged lives", i.e. language is embedded in social practice and social practice likewise is mediated by language. Thus, the primary tenet of linguistic anthropology is immediately disclosed. Four key terms are offered to guide the reader through the rest of the book: multi-functionality, language ideologies, practice and indexicality. The following chapter provides real-life examples of research questions in the field and discusses data collection methods, analysis processes, and common ethical issues. The third and fourth chapter give more flesh to the tenet that language reflects and constructs social practice, by zooming in on language acquisition in different cultures and the relation between language, thought and culture. The works of Boas, Sapir and Whorf on the intertwined nature of language and thought are carefully discussed as well as contemporary research proving some Whorfian effects, in e.g. the conception of space.

The second part, 'Communities of Speakers, Hearers, Readers and Writers,' examines the role of language in the formation of communities and the influence of the communities' practices on verbal behaviour. Chapter 5 questions the notion of "speech community" and presents alternatives such as "speech network" and "community of practice". Chapter 6 presents some facets of multilingualism in a "globalised" context, arguing that both the micro-level practices of individuals and the macro-level ideologies of a society need to be taken into account to understand multi-lingual behaviour. Chapter 7 introduces research on literacy practices and the interface between spoken and written language. Next to the famous research of Heath on how literacy practices in three different American communities influence children's school performance, the chapter includes modern-day research on love-letter writing in Nepal and instant messaging. Chapter 8 focuses on the performance side of language, offering three approaches to study the role of speech in enacting social events: performance as opposed to "mere" competence; performativity (i.e. speech act theory); and performance as interaction between verbal artists and their audience who together create meaning and identity through their actions.

The third part, called 'Language, Power and Social differentiation,' looks at language as an index of identity and social inequality. Chapter 9 on language and gender is a balanced overview of patterns of language use in relation to the social concept of gender

and gendered ideologies. Chapter 10 on race and ethnicity raises the legendary American Ebonics controversy and comments on forms of overt and covert racist talk. Chapter 11 is a short introduction to endangered languages, discussing the extent of language extinction and what it means to talk about “death” in the case of languages. The final chapter concludes the whole book, drawing together various strands from the previous sections to explain that language is closely connected to issues of power and agency. How people use language and think about language use both reflects and shapes social norms, inequalities in relations and cultural identities, whether these are debated or taken for granted.

Overall, this reviewer finds the book balanced, appreciable and well written. There is some minor discontent (probably because of the linguistic background of this reviewer), since linguistics usually is taken as Chomskian. This stance is on the one hand understandable since Chomsky has dominated the field for some decades, but on the other hand, it leaves little room for acknowledging the contribution of early field linguists to anthropology, or the emergent field of documentary linguistics, which places language back in its social context. It explicitly seeks to profit from an interdisciplinary approach to language as it is used in a community (see e.g. Widlok (2005) and the key volume of Gippert et al.).

Additionally, in a number of places, the author presents theories and discussions as “daunting”, “challenging” and “difficult”, which will stimulate some readers to persevere, but may leave others with a feeling of inadequacy. Sometimes, the debates seem to be more central than the actual anthropological research (the section on the New Literary Studies approach seems to be included for the sake of the argument (ch. 7) and the notion of chiasm (ch. 8) is not central to the discussion). Worse, the author qualifies her own account of a certain critique as probably obscuring (p. 168). If so, then why include it? It is the task of the author to illuminate, not mystify, theoretical discourse – which, it must be emphasised, she does admirably throughout the book.

Lastly, the author uses her own fieldwork in Nepal as example in several places, even to illustrate her “mistakes” made during fieldwork. Research on new technologies and developments is incorporated as well (examples include internet, and schooling for girls in Nepal). This gives the book a fresh, honest and up-to-date taste. This reviewer also liked the use of the four key terms introduced in the first chapter to shed light on the topics presented in subsequent chapters, creating a sense of coherence and teaching how to look at various issues from an anthropological point of view. Next to the four key notions, Ahearn gradually introduces other pertinent anthropological concepts such as emergence and hegemony, thus enabling (or as the anthropologist says, socialising) students to understand (and hopefully participate in) anthropological discourse.

Anne-Christie Hellenthal  
*Addis Ababa University (Ethiopia)*