

A Linguistic Anthropology of Images

Constantine V. Nakassis

Department of Anthropology, University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois, USA;
email: cnakassi@uchicago.edu

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Abstract

This review sketches a linguistic anthropology of images. While linguistic anthropology has not historically focalized images as a central theoretical object of concern, linguistic anthropologists' research has increasingly concerned images of various sorts. Furthermore, in its critique of structuralist reductions of language, the field has advanced an analytic vocabulary for thinking about the image *in* discourse. In this article, I review scholarship in linguistic anthropology on prototypic images to show how these advances (e.g., entextualization, performativity, perspective, and enregisterment) can be leveraged to theorize images more generally. In doing so, I argue against any hard distinction between language and image. I conclude by expanding out from a linguistic anthropology of images to what I call “a linguistic anthropology of . . .,” a field characterized by an open-ended horizon of objects and modes of inquiry, all linked together *as* linguistic anthropology.

INTRODUCTION

A linguistic anthropology of images doesn't exist. This statement is true in that images have not served as a central object of concerted theoretical explication for linguistic anthropology for most of its history (as, e.g., language, interaction, and ideology have). The statement, however, is false in at least three ways. First, linguistic anthropologists have long analyzed images of various sorts (photographs, films, etc.), even if they have not always theorized the image as such. Second, some recent research in the field has topicalized the image as object for theorization (as I review in what follows). But most importantly, this statement is falsified once we realize that linguistic anthropology has developed an account of images—*sans la lettre* and *avant l'image*, as it were—in its analysis of the pragmatic poetics of discourse. In this review, I work through these three falsifications to spell out and paint a picture of what a linguistic anthropology of images might be, with a particular focus on leveraging the third (the account of the image in discourse, that is, discourse *as* image) to add to the second (theorizing the image as such).

LINGUISTIC ANTHROPOLOGY AND IMAGES

Reflecting on the intertwined history of linguistics and anthropology in North America, Hymes (1964, p. xxiii) baptized the field of linguistic anthropology as “*the study of language within the context of anthropology*” (emphasis in original). Self-conceptualizations of the field, then and now, often take it, thus, to be the study of “language” “in” “culture,” “society,” “context,” “use,” or “interaction.” But if linguistic anthropologists have framed their object of analysis as anchored by “language,” the “in. . .” has necessarily led them to other types of semiotic phenomena, including images. For example, linguistic anthropologists have studied drawings and paintings (e.g., Chumley 2016, Hoffmann-Dilloway 2020); photographic images in print (e.g., Ball 2014, Sidnell 2021), film (e.g., Hardy 2014; Kirk 2016; Swinehart 2018; Nakassis 2020, 2023a), television and video (e.g., Goodwin 1994, Pardo 2013, Urban 2015), and social media (e.g., Swinehart 2012, Calhoun 2019, Ross 2019); blueprints (Murphy 2005); emojis and memes (Soh 2020, Davis 2021); anime and video games (Silvio 2010, Nozawa 2013); and figurines and puppets (Wortham et al. 2011, Barker 2019), among others. Linguistic anthropologists have also focused on images within their own practices, in transcription (e.g., Hoffmann-Dilloway 2021, Murphy 2021) and field recordings (e.g., Feld & Williams 1975, Murphy 2023, Zuckerman 2023).

Much of this work has focused on language in images, as, for example, in investigations of the representation of speech variation in audiovisual media (Murphy 1978, Lefkowitz 2000, Bucholtz 2011, Bucholtz & Lopez 2011, Queen 2015, Lopez & Bucholtz 2017, Graham 2020) or of the interplay between speech and visual image (e.g., Lefkowitz 2005, 2019; Meek 2006, 2020; Jaworski 2015; Davis 2021). Other works, which I focus on herein, have analyzed images as such. Most such work, however, has left the image theoretically taken for granted. Why should this be so?

FROM IMAGE/LANGUAGE TO IMAGE-TEXT

The phrase “a linguistic anthropology of images” does not mean the study of language in images. (Quite the opposite, as I discuss below: It primarily means the study of images in discourse.) But if so, isn't there something odd about the phrase, if we understand *linguistic* anthropology to be “about” language (in some way or other) and images not to be language? The catachresis of this phrase is designed to deconstruct the perspectives from which it rings strange, namely the ideological conceptualizations of and division between image and language (Mitchell 2015, Barker & Nakassis 2020). This divide—much like the language/culture divide—is a Humpty Dumpty that humanistic sciences seem to feel the need to break to make their runny social theory omelets (**Table 1**).

Table 1 An ideological diagram of stereotypes opposing image and language

Image	Language
Iconic	Symbolic
Analog	Digital
Non-representational	Representational
Natural, motivated	Conventional, arbitrary
Affective, sensuous	Logical, intellectual
Concrete	Abstract
Visual	Aural
Immediate	Mediated

Across this chasm, post-Enlightenment thinkers such as Locke, Leibniz, Peirce, Frege, and the early Wittgenstein attempted to bridge the gap with “picture theories” of language, just as high structuralists like Barthes and Metz posited “languages” and “grammars” of images. Today, we are generally content to let old dogs lie.

The problem space itself must be redrawn. But to redraw it, we have to see that this diagram follows from the conceptualizations we hold of language and image themselves, such that they appear as distinct in kind in the first place.¹ Yet, as Hoffmann-Dilloway (2020, 2021) has shown, how, where, and whether the boundary between image and language is drawn vary across time and space. While in Western art-therapeutic contexts, for example, images may be opposed to talk (as when turning to drawing to express the unsayable), in the Nepali Deaf community she studies, for deaf subjects unsocialized to Nepali Sign Language, drawing is understood as a stepping stone to, and thus part of, language.

Yet if we refuse to reductively define language by its unique capacity to semantically denote (Silverstein 1976, Harkness 2020)—a reduction that has dominated Western thinking for the last several millennia—and instead center those semiotic modalities and discursive functions shared by any number of other media (including “images”), and if the terms “language” and “image” are correlatively defined, then so too must the very notion of an image not be reduced to our default ideological conceptualization, namely as *visual* representations, segmentable relative to some *spatial* frame (as embodied in prototypical images such as drawings, paintings, photographs, or films).

How might we reconsider the notion of image as that which is always already immanent to discourse? Here, we are concerned not with finding the (Adamic) picture of Logical Form beneath the surface structure of speech nor the “code” or “system” of the image, but rather with the emergent poetics or temporalized texture of semiosis, the image distributed “in” and across sign activity, in whatever medium or modality. Dissolving the language versus image opposition to clarify what traverses both, this is what I have called an image-text (Nakassis 2019; compare with Mitchell 2015, pp. 39–47).

IMAGE IN/OF SEMIOSIS: ANTHROPOLOGY OF VISUAL COMMUNICATION

Postwar linguistic anthropology was founded in the crucible of a number of critical developments, central to which were the successes of linguistic structuralism (reflected in the founding of

¹Is it a surprise that in such an ideological enclosure we find a teratology centering on writing as a spatialized, visual representation of speech? As linguistic anthropologists have shown, the lines between image and language become particularly blurry when it comes to writing, both as an aestheticization of language (Bender 2002, Jaworski 2015, Spitzmüller 2015, Murphy 2017, Davis 2018) and as image in itself (Boone 1994, Choksi 2018, Debenport & Webster 2019).

SOL WORTH, VISUAL COMMUNICATION, AND THE SOCIAL STUDY OF SPEECH AT PENN

Trained as a painter, Sol Worth (1922–1977) worked as a commercial photographer and filmmaker into his forties, only becoming a full-time professor of communications at the University of Pennsylvania (Penn) in 1964. At Penn he worked alongside Ray Birdwhistell (at Penn from 1969 to 1988), Dell Hymes in anthropology (later, education; at Penn from 1965 to 1987); Erving Goffman in sociology (1968–1982); and William Labov in linguistics (1971–2015). Goffman, Hymes, Labov, and Worth were all participants in Penn’s Center for Urban Ethnography. It was in this exciting nexus of new thinking about communication in sociocultural context that Worth’s ideas about the anthropology of visual communication developed and contributed.

autonomous linguistics departments out of anthropology departments) and a growing sense of its shortcomings. Hymes’s ethnography of speaking, Goffman’s “neglected situation” (and, later, “interaction order”), and Gumperz’s interactional sociolinguistics—such paradigm shifts turned to pragmatic meaning, social context, and the speech event to rethink the problem of language in/and culture. The same period also saw something of a forerunner of a linguistic anthropology of images: the anthropology of visual communication developed by Sol Worth (see the sidebar titled Sol Worth, Visual Communication, and the Social Study of Speech at Penn).

From the 1960s to his premature death in 1977, Worth developed a systematic account of the moving visual image that drew on informatic sender–receiver models, formal linguistic theory, the ethnography of communication, and structuralist film semiology. Worth (1981) distinguished between using media as records of culture (“visual anthropology”) and what he called the “anthropology of visual communication” (p. 185) or “ethnographic semiotics” (pp. 83, 202), that is, seeing media as forms of communication that reveal symbolic modes of worlding. While his early work hemmed close to cognitivist accounts of “film language,” or “vidistics” (Worth 1966; 1981, pp. 36–73), under the influence of linguistic anthropology he increasingly saw the limits of this approach (Worth 1978), expanding into an “ethnography of visual communication” that put film “codes” (conventions of filmmaking and interpretation) into cultural “context.”

But while Worth’s later work presciently moved to ethnographic accounts of the pragmatics of events of visual communication, this view suffered various limitations, most manifest in its methodological operationalization. In an effort to decenter film reception (in the mode of criticism of film as art) and professional filmmaking (and the culture industries) so as to access the culture of how visual events take meaningful form, Worth advocated for the study of “bio-documentary” filmmaking: filmmaking by tyros such as urban American teenagers or, more infamously in *Through Navajo Eyes* (Worth & Adair 1972), Native Americans. Worth and Adair taught a series of Navajo youth to use film equipment, subsequently asking them to make whatever films they wanted. From observation of the learning process; their filming and editing; analysis of the films themselves; and, to a very little extent, community reception (Montoya 2013), Worth & Adair (1972) claimed, among other things (pp. 96, 98), to “capture” a “vision” of the Navajo “world” (p. 14). As they argued, their subjects’ filmmaking resonated with Navajo fashions of speaking about events and motion (pp. 95, 124ff, 166–80, 190–98), in addition to norms of vision and interaction (pp. 159, 190–98) and storytelling (pp. 152, 227).

Rather than review the many critiques of this project (Chalfen 1997, Pack 2012, Montoya 2013, Peterson 2013), let me indicate where Worth’s project—and the “sociovidistics” of his student Richard Chalfen (1974, 1975, 1984)—differs from, but also anticipates, the linguistic anthropology of images imagined here. A critical shortcoming of Worth’s ethnographic semiotics is that it

never fully sheds the taken-for-granted differentiation of “codes” and “contexts.” While Worth takes actual events as central to any account of images, the evenementality of communication as an emergent, contingent process was never fully theorized semiotically. And, like the ethnography of speaking which inspired it, without an account of the event-based processes by which conventions (norms of making, interpreting, etc.) emerge as resources and objects of contestation, institutionalization, and the like, this approach could only see an essentialized “culture” behind its explananda (versus the semiotic/sociological/political organization of the events themselves; Pack 2012). As such, this approach inevitably reproduced the Hymesean view of the Jakobsonian speech event as a series of static correlations between speech-event factors and their realization (group X realizes factor Y in way Z versus group A in way C, etc.). Finally, for Worth, the image is visual and, while compared with language, is considered autonomous from it.

As hinted in later work, Worth intuited some of these limitations. In an essay first published in 1974, “Toward an Anthropological Politics of Symbolic Forms,” Worth (1981, pp. 85–107) turned toward a pragmatics (anthropological politics) of signs (symbolic forms; even with a nod to Peirce’s notion of iconic indexicality). Worth notes that our interpretive frames for images are deeply ideological, seeing images as transparent windows to social life rather than as refracting the worlds they help to constitute. What we need, he suggests, is an account of how “societies control the production and distribution of symbolic forms” (p. 103) and, thus, “the politicization of symbolic forms” (p. 106). This need he saw as unsolvable by the ethnography of communication, given its narrow focus on verbal communication (p. 97). Whether Worth would have continued to develop these lines of inquiry is unknown, but after his death linguistic anthropology did not follow. Indeed, the efflorescence of recent publications on images in linguistic anthropology has not engaged Worth’s legacy, instead drawing on an alternate genealogy emanating from a different reading of Jakobson’s speech event, one which productively decentered the Hymesean uptake in favor of a Peircean-inspired account of indexicality (and, later, iconicity). While Worth focused on the visual as language-like communication, this latter approach, discussed and elaborated below, came to attend to the ways in which verbal discourse, in its emergent, evenemential poetics, functions as an image.

IMAGE IN/OF SEMIOSIS: ENTEXTUALIZATION AND IMAGE-TEXTS

In a landmark paper, “Shifters, Linguistic Categories, and Cultural Description,” Silverstein (1976) reformulated the Jakobsonian speech event through the notions of indexicality, each speech-event factor (speaker, addressee, channel, etc.) being some bit of context a sign (or “message”) could index (“point to”), and metapragmatics, each speech-event function (conative, emotive, phatic, etc.) regimenting the indexicality of the factors. In working out the implications of this account of (meta)indexicality, later publications asked how the speech event—as comprising some array of signs unfolding in time and space—is itself constituted by sign activity, that is, through the emergence (or entextualization) of “text” in relation to its coconstituted “co(n)text” (Bauman & Briggs 1990, Silverstein & Urban 1996). Entextualization denotes the process through which token-signs in indexical contiguity may come to gel into internally coherent (iconic) textures taken as texts that may (indeed, must) be de- and recontextualized *across* events. A text, thus, is a metasemiotic type, one which emerges from and regiments the token-signs that instantiate it in some singular event.

Silverstein (1993) distinguished denotational and interactional texts. The former are cohesions of symbolic signs entextualizing some information structure (e.g., a narrative; what is said in discourse). The latter are coherences of pragmatic (indexical) signs entextualizing some act type (what is done by discourse). Here, Silverstein extended Jakobson’s (1960) “poetic” or “aesthetic function”—that (implicit) metapragmatics that focalizes the message form in and of itself

PEIRCE'S THREE KINDS OF ICONICITY

For Peirce (1932, vol. 2, para. 277), iconicity describes the realizable possibility of a semiotic ground (relation) between some representamen (sign-vehicle) and its object based on likeness (to some interpretant that construes that ground as such). Peirce discerned three kinds:

1. What he (confusingly) calls an “image”: a pure possibility of likeness independent of similarity/comparison (a consummatable yet unconsummated similarity, i.e., a quality).
2. A “diagram”: likeness between representamen and object based on composition (i.e., likeness in [indexical] relations between their respective parts).
3. A “metaphor”: (symbolic) likeness between sign and object *as* triadic signs (i.e., between their ground–interpretant relations).

An image-text is a diagram, most prototypically whose parts are images.

as a material instantiation of qualities—to account for the texture (spatiotemporal patterning) of denotational and interactional texts. The poetic function describes the capacity of signs in spatiotemporal contiguity to emergently highlight their likeness (e.g., via parallelism, repetition), thereby cohering aesthetically while being differentiated from what they inscribe as their constitutive outsides (context). This function—most palpable in, but not limited to, poetry—precipitates what Jakobson (1960, p. 359) called, after Hopkins, “figures in sound,” pictures painted through the sonic qualia of speech.

Linguistic anthropologists have availed Jakobson’s poetic function to discuss the emergent patterned quality of verbal discourse, in full-tilt ritual (e.g., Perrino 2002, Ball 2014, Knowlton 2015), verbal art [e.g., “ethnopoetics” (e.g., Hymes 1996, pp. 165–83; Webster 2014; Moore 2015)], and “interaction ritual” [sensu Goffman (e.g., Silverstein 2022, pp. 68–114)], showing how denotational texts are projected into interactional texts via the poetic patterning of deixis, syntactic phrasing, enregistered lexis, presupposable cultural knowledge, and the like. As Silverstein (2004, p. 626) writes: “Ritual works in a kind of pictorial or iconic (specifically, diagrammatic) mode,” wherein its entextualization “projects as its contextualization that which it dynamically figurates along a ‘cosmic axis’ . . . of knowledge or belief” (see the sidebar titled Peirce’s Three Kinds of Iconicity). Silverstein continues: “The literal form of ritual text is always such an *iconic index*—a picture made real in the here-and-now—of that which it accomplishes, patently or transparently mapping the diagrammatic figuration of its denotational language. . . into its interactional import, or effect” (p. 627). Such “figurations”—pictures sketched in signs, in ritual and other interactional events—are “dynamic” because they emerge and transform *in time* through processes of entextualization (rather than, e.g., as seemingly static expanses of color on a plane).

While this account suggests diagrammatic iconicity (“pictures”) as the basis of entextualization, it does not separate out this dimension of textuality as distinct from interactional and denotational textuality. Recent work has done so (Nakassis 2019, Hoffmann-Dilloway 2020, Wirtz 2020, Babcock 2022), distinguishing aesthetic, interactional, and denotational textuality as three linked dimensions of entextualization. On this view, an image-text is what the poetic function entextualizes, where token-signs in indexical contiguity emergently aesthetically figurate a diagrammatic texture through their iconic resonances (i.e., cohering in qualities or relations).

Image-texts should be distinguished from the interactional and denotational texts in which they also partake precisely because they may circulate independently of them. For example, Reyes (2020a) has recently shown how nineteenth- and twentieth-century US empire building in the United States and the Philippines turned on a certain type of racialized image-text—a

before–after schema of “wild” to “cultured” subjects, whose sequence diagrammed the pragmatic effects of colonial civilization. Such an image–text of sequence was a composition of other image–texts (photographs of “savage” and “civilized” Filipinos arrayed from left to right on the page) that not only pictured a contrast but emplotted it within a particular narrative (denotational) structure (as the indexical, causal effect of the civilizing mission of US imperialism). Critically, this image–text circulated across distinct, if also linked, political projects and narratives, historically emerging in American depictions of Indian and Black subjects before being exported to the context of Philippine colonization. We might even detect this image’s peregrination in the postcolonial Philippine politics of skin-lightening advertisements (Reyes 2020b), whose images of before–after transformations similarly draw on a semiotics of (epidermal) darkness-to-lightness and (national) primitivity-to-modernity, though here embodied within acts of individual self-beautification through capitalist consumption.

This brief discussion implies the following: First, images are not necessarily visual. (Hence the problem of the image is not the same as that of visual communication.) Images may exist in and across any and every modality and medium wherein indexical iconic (diagrammatic) semiosis is possible (Lefkowitz 2003, p. 93). (It’s all of them.) Images, thus, are not in opposition to language; nor are they the special preserve of our prototypes for images: paintings, film, and so on. Images are *in* discourse, they are its shape (that is, the contours of discourse cast an image); they are the basis of our feel for language and of its pragmatic effectivity.

Second, images are not only the outcomes of evenemential processes; they are the very form of those processes and, in that sense, are processes themselves. Every image–text, as a virtual metasemiotic type, is embodied in arrays of material signs unfolding in time and space. Mitchell (2015, p. 16) calls such token–arrays “pictures,” in contrast to images. The former you can hang on the wall, he says, reanalyzing an English fashion of speaking, while the latter you cannot (**Figure 1**).

An image is borne by its pictures. One only sees, hears, or feels an image in/through pictures, a text through/in a texture in a temporalized event. At the same time, an image is a (metasemiotic) principle that links pictures together as “the same,” guiding perceptual judgments that construe them as such. If so, the image is both immanent in and beyond its pictures, for an image is the emergent precipitate of a dynamic configuration of text-in-context (the former of which, the “text,” always iterable in some other context/configuration) for someone in some embodied activity in time (e.g., seeing).

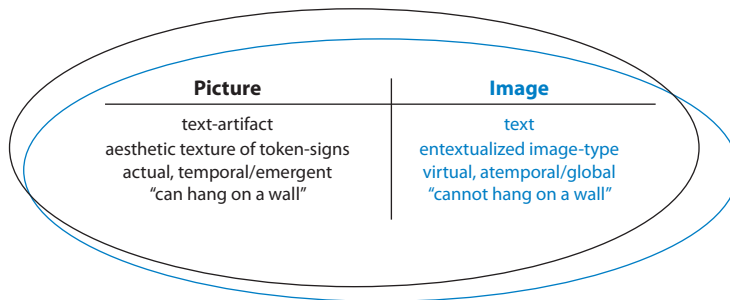


Figure 1

A metapicture about pictures and images (aesthetic textures and image–texts). The overlapping ovals represent the mutual relations of encompassment between pictures (qua aesthetic textures, text–artifacts) and images (qua image–texts, types): namely, that an image (type) only exists as instantiated in and by its pictures (tokens), just as the intelligibility of pictures is always regimented by the images they manifest. That the ovals do not overlap exactly, however, represents that pictures exceed their images, just as images transcend the particular pictures that instantiate them.

An image, therefore, is not that which is within some spatial frame but rather the virtual shape of a temporal process of framing (i.e., entextualization). We only ever encounter, experience, and construe images in time-bound events (Worth 1978, p. 13). As Murphy's (2005) ethnography of architectural practice shows, seemingly static, spatial text-artifacts (pictures) like blueprints are always co(n)textualized by talk and gesture, where features of the page (lines in relationship to other lines) are brought into salience through dynamic, iconic gestures (e.g., outlining a sliding gate) and denotational description ("Just let it slide back there"). The image of a building is not *in* the decontextualized blueprint but rather emerges across this collaborative process, only ever experienced under conditions of co(n)textualization by multiple signs in time, as an encompassing diagram within which metonymic image-artifacts (like blueprints) are its parts. It is all the more interesting, then, that in and through such processes we tend in ideological consciousness to decontextualize and staticize the image, fix its time, and spatially reify it (where the borders of the page, frame, or screen are taken as the borders of the image). This, too, is an achievement of entextualization, one which enables the de/recontextualization of images. A linguistic anthropology of images is the ethnographic study of processes of entextualization and contextualization, of the reification and circulation (and dissolving) of images in and across events of semiosis.

Third, such processes are metasemiotically mediated by styles, registers, genres, and, most importantly, semiotic ideologies (Keane 2009, Malitsky 2010, Gershon & Malitsky 2011, Alpert 2019). Semiotic ideologies condition the ways in which images are construed, what they may come to do, how they are institutionalized, and so forth. Importantly, ideologies themselves comprise semiotic processes (and thus are themselves metapragmatically mediated), and so have an event-based and -breaching semiotics available for empirical inquiry.

Fourth, image-texts always also manifest as interactional texts [i.e., are (part of) acts], often bearing denotational texts in turn (as we saw in Reyes's example above), even as every denotational text projects into an interactional text, both of which have a poetics, an image immanent in and yet also detachable from them. Such orders of textuality, thus, are not distinct kinds but aspects of texts. An image is not a type of sign but rather a dimension of semiosis. How such distinct dimensions of textuality—*aesthetic, interactional, denotational*—interact is an important question for a linguistic anthropology of images, as discussed below.

To recap: In critiquing the limits of the language construct to account for contextualized events of verbal discourse, linguistic anthropology has theorized the image *avant l'image* and *avec le lettre*. How can this account of images be extended to understand the wide variety of ways in which image-texts manifest in and mediate social life—indeed, to those prototypical images which have historically been peripheral to the field's theoretical focus yet increasingly are central to our empirical materials? And, by generalizing from their particularities, how may we further provide an adequate account of semiosis in social life *tout court* (including language and discourse)? In what follows, I turn to areas where progress has been made in answering these questions while gesturing to horizons for future work. While other thematics could be discussed (e.g., authenticity/authentification, chronotopes, production format), I focus on entextualization, performativity, perspective, and enregisterment as mutually implicating semiotic dimensions central to theorizing the image.

LINGUISTIC ANTHROPOLOGIES OF IMAGES

Entextualizing and Circulating Images

Linguistic anthropologists of images have productively turned an ethnographic eye to how image-texts of various prototypic sorts are semiotically produced and circulated (e.g., Peterson 2011, 2017; Pardo 2014; Murphy 2015; Kirk 2016; Nakassis 2016, 2023a).

Studying the entextualization of advertising texts, Shankar (2015), for example, has shown how “diversity” is imagined and represented at various stages of the advertising process. As she demonstrates, the commodification of diversity as a marketing category—in particular, of Asian Americans as a market segment—is a semiotic process that precipitates image-texts at multiple levels: patterns of talk in development meetings; sketches of concepts; presentation slides in pitch meetings; and ultimately the photographs, videos, and ad copy that make up marketing materials. Such images are bundled into “assemblages” “comprising lexical and visual indexes and icons intended to create brand identity” (Shankar 2015, p. 91) and, more particularly for such firms, to signal, sell, and instantiate a valued quality, “diversity.”

By looking at the emergence, circulation, and transformation of images, Shankar shows the complex traces left by processes of entextualization and circulation. Ad image-texts are polyphonic, reflecting how advertisers are liminally situated between their (white) corporate clients, for whom brand identity is paramount, and their imagined Asian American audiences, for whom authenticity is critical. Thus, images are what Murphy (2015), in his study of modernist Swedish design, calls “heteroglossic objects,” semiotic forms that refract and are “perlocutionarily inscribed” by the demands of the multiple participation frameworks within which image-texts come into being and travel. Shankar’s images of diversity, thus, diagrammatically betray as much as they ideologically belie their processes of becoming, thereby reproducing and circulating (post)racialized ideologies of multiculturalism in/by their entextualization. Yet to see this requires contextualizing and exploding prototypic pictures (advertisement photographs, design sketches, etc.) by bringing into ethnographic focus the social processes within which images emerge as parts of text-in-context wholes; such assemblages are not simply context to what becomes image-text. Rather, such processes are themselves images; they have a poetic form which is transduced into the prototypic pictures they precipitate, metonyms of a process that is recoverable from the right ethnographic angle but never simply from reading the planar surface of the staticized text.

Importantly, not only are images made in and out of language, bodies, pixels, light, and so forth (their “media”); they also make such things. Hardy (2014), for example, has shown how the contemporary emergence of the idea of a Bhojpuri speech community with its own “language” is the effect as much as it is the precondition of cinematic practices of image-making (see also Kirk 2016 on Punjabi cinema). While language variety might seem to be what makes Bhojpuri cinema “Bhojpuri,” Hardy shows that filmmaking practices—from scriptwriting to shooting to dubbing—produce a “film Bhojpuri” that isn’t anyone’s speech; in fact, it is mainly Hindi with shibboleths of widely understood Bhojpuri forms sprinkled in (avoiding forms that are too regionally particular). As she argues, it is being cotextualized in film texts alongside visual, aural, musical, and narratological signs that index and iconically instate Bhojpuriness—such as filmmaking styles (e.g., cinematography, editing), scene types (e.g., raunchy “item number” song sequences with gyrating hips and fleshy close-ups), narrative themes (e.g., of migration), types of exhibition spaces (single-screen theaters), and so forth—that speech in such films has become naturalized, for certain publics, as *the* Bhojpuri language. Here, language community and cinema industry co-constitute each other, such that speech is swept up into, by being cotextualized alongside, the entextualization of filmic image-texts even as such images themselves produce (and enregister, as discussed below) a language.

Performativity of Images

In the above cases, aesthetic forms—the low-angle shot of a thrusting pelvis, the smiling face of a well-lit model—are part and parcel of interactional events (shooting a film, selling it to distributors; designing an ad, pitching it to a client) whose pragmatic effects they contribute to and

model. Put otherwise, images like photographs, sketches, or film shots under certain conditions are performative, projecting into an interactional text (a pragmatic doing) by instantiating in a here-and-now what they sketch in their aesthetic form.

In “Gender Advertisements” (first published in the journal Worth edited, *Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communication*), Goffman (1976) suggested the intimate similarity of portraiture and ritual, arguing that photographic print advertisements are a form of social ceremony where society pictures itself for itself, not as a reflection but as a guide for perception and action, in the instance, the performance of gendered identities and relationalities. As Goffman notes, images like these reveal “glimpses” of how we “pose,” be it for a physical camera or the discursive camera of social life more generally. But how? That is, how do image-texts—be they in ritual or advertisement—touch down in particular situations effectuating performative action?

Ball (2014) describes this effectuation through the notion of dicentization. Dicentization denotes the process whereby an iconic likeness—for example, lines of paint on the body (to use Nancy Munn’s example from aboriginal Australia that Ball discusses)—is taken as an indexical relation of real, causal connection—the manifestation of the ancestral dreamtime in the individual’s body—such that “what is depicted [as image] comes to pass [as social fact]” (Ball 2014, p. 153). Barker (2019, p. 376) has ethnographically explored this process in Kazakhstani puppet theater, where the “puppet’s resemblance to a living creature is treated as if it resulted from the puppet being alive.” As Barker shows, images and stories come alive and act not only through their interaction (where the iconic form of the puppet in motion instantiates a narrative) but also through the complex collaborations between performers and audiences in real-time interactional events—in particular, in the ways in which the presence of the viewer as a spectator who “knows” that the puppet is inanimate is incorporated into the performance. This includes, critically, conspicuous artifice and designed absences in the performance, gaps in the poetic texture that invite the spectator to creatively fill in the missing details that the image itself elliptically implies.

The image here is distributed across the event but manifests as the leading edge of vitality in the dicentized body of the puppet, a point that Wirtz (2020) similarly demonstrates regarding the agentive force of Santería altars in Cuba. Wirtz shows how altars are multidimensional cosmogenic diagrams, simultaneously functioning as prisms and constellations that differentiate and relate elements of the altar so as to form apertures that conceal as much as they open up interfaces to spirit worlds. Altars, as composite image-texts of the cosmos, are themselves made up of images: figurines of spirits and photographs of ancestors curated through the organization of color, smell, and substance meaningfully splayed across the altar’s space. Altars are not static texts to be read, however, but stages for social action. Such images always have an event structure, coming alive in rituals of divination, where different spatial zones of the altar come into the foreground as transformations in the here-and-now are effectuated by action in and on the altar itself. The result is that altars are temporal images of the changing relationships between the spirit world and our own, growing and transforming in their arrangements as the cosmos itself grows and transforms through their interfaces.

But if dicentization is a process of images becoming performative, it depends on its ideological mediation, a point Keane (2009) makes regarding the infamous Danish cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad. The capacity of images to merely represent (and, in the Danish case, express a point of view) or forcefully presence (and, in the Islamic world, cause hurt) depend on semiotic ideologies as to what an image is (Nakassis 2017, 2023a; Padgett 2021). Such ideological uptakes may also become the grounds for forms of social differentiation, and misunderstanding, as when Protestant iconoclastic liberal ideologies become the basis for the “evaluation of Muslims’ nonmodernity” (Keane 2009, p. 56) and their ongoing marginalization in Europe. As this case reveals, semiotic ideologies may dicentize *or* denude images. In addition, it shows how such processes are always

perspectival and socially fractious; indeed, the image and its uptake themselves become the basis for a diagrammatic schema of “us” and “them.”

The performativity of images, in short, is a situated processual achievement of the entextualization of images in and as interactional texts, where what is pictured in the process of entextualization is laminated onto its contextualized event of picturing. Such enveloping text-in-context configurations (within which the focal image is often the “leading incident” or fetish metonym) serve, in short, as metapictures (Mitchell 2015, pp. 18–19) of the effects enacted in and by the image’s inscription. Such achievements are perspectival and ideologically mediated. But if (meta)pictures are perspectival, what is a perspective semiotically?

Drawing a Perspective

Gal & Irvine (2019, p. 17) have recently reformulated the concept of ideology through the notion of perspective: “Perspective is the point of view or line of sight that biographical persons can take up and bring to bear on a situation. . . . In semiotic terms, perspectives are clusters of conventional conjectures that are presumed by ideological work to go together. . . . Perspectives are always partial views and so imply the existence of other vantage points.” While Gal & Irvine deploy a visual idiom, they are most centrally concerned with speech and language ideologies, though their conception of perspective is much wider, with implications for all sign phenomena.

Not just as a visual metaphor, however, linguistic anthropologists have also explored the semiotics of perspective with regard to how we come to “see” image-texts of seeing. Goodwin (1994, 1996) influentially explored how “professional vision” is constructed and enacted in events of interaction. Looking at looking in airline control rooms, archaeological digs, and US courtrooms, Goodwin shows how perspectives are semiotically prefigured in image-texts and, more importantly, in the framing (the highlighting, amplifying, etc.) of those images in their contextualization. In *California v. Powell et al.* (1992), in particular, Goodwin details how “experts” were able to re-contextualize the video of Rodney King’s brutal beating by police in ways that allowed jurors to see with the eyes of the officers, detecting in the video image not police brutalization (via the perspective of the machinic camcorder) but rather indexes of King’s ongoing resistance and escalation. Here, a “discursive camera” (Nakassis 2023b) in the courtroom opened up a horizon and aperture of experience for jurors by inviting them to look at an image-text of looking from a particular (nondisinterested, situated) perspective (that of the police). The perlocutionary effect was acquittal.

Extending the Bakhtinian notion of voicing, Chumley (2016) has also explored such dynamics—what she calls “envisioning”—where processes of entextualization prefigure our seeing-as-other (what she calls “visions”). Just as we speak with the voices of others (Bakhtin 1981, Weidman 2021), we also see with eyes of others (Babcock 2022, Nakassis 2023b). Chumley demonstrates how realist paintings in contemporary Chinese art schools entextualize a particular kind of looking subject [cf. Inoue’s (2006) “listening subject”], an “envisioner” indexically invoked by the painting’s aesthetic qualities (palette, composition, iconography). Such subject positions are not biographical persons but rather what Berger (1972) called “ways of seeing,” semiotic figures that embodied viewers can take a stance to and even inhabit as their own. In Chumley’s (2016, p. 101) case, postsocialist realism entextualizes modes of “sympathetic objectification,” where working-class “weariness and suffering” on the canvas can be gazed upon in appreciation by a middle-class bourgeois envisioner well versed in socialist ethics.

Yet footings to “visions” always unfold in interactional events within larger, enveloping diagrammatic textures. That is, perspectives are not pre-given or determinative but rather are invitations figured by image-texts under conditions of contextualization (critical of which are

embodied viewers' uptakes). One doesn't simply see (or voice) but takes a stance to seeing-as in so seeing, precipitating other ($n+1$ th meta)perspectives which themselves may be taken up and circulated (de/recontextualized), even conventionalized and institutionalized in social life (as professional visions, oppositional gazes, etc.). In a word, perspectives are always caught up in processes of enregisterment.

Enregisterment Through/of Images

Enregisterment denotes the historical process by which repertoires of signs (linguistic or otherwise) are zoned off—internally united and differentiated from one another—as a function of such repertoire forms (the signs so zoned off) sharing some nonreferential indexical value, that is, the way in which they point to and characterize some feature of their context of use with some intensional stereotype, in particular, some social figure of personhood enacted in and by the use of the register's repertoire forms (Agha 2007). Registers, thus, are metapragmatic models of pragmatic variation (e.g., in speech) that construe and regiment the interactional textuality of discourse as a (pragmatic-poetic) function of being coherently in register (or not).

As Gal & Irvine (2019) note, registers always exist in the plural, organized around some “axis of differentiation” that analogically aligns various contrasts embodied or signaled by the register's repertoire forms (signs $x_{1...n}$:signs $y_{1...n}$::social-type x' :social-type y' ::stereotype/quality x'' :stereotype/quality y'' , etc.). Registers, thus, are always parts of a diagrammatic schema of differentiation. This virtual image, however, only ever lives through events of semiosis, and it does so by metapragmatically regimenting the entextualization of image-texts wherein participants in discourse figure and enact—presence in the here-and-now of interaction—(stances to) social identities composed out of precisely those enregistered stereotypes.

When we speak of “images of personhood” (Agha 2007) in the context of enregisterment, thus, we are not being metaphorical or alluding to “mental images” invoked by speech. Rather, under conditions of enregisterment the texture of semiosis is a particular kind of picture of its pragmatics (e.g., voicing a social identity), which is possible given ideological perspectives that organize repertoires of signs as standing in diagrammatic (contrastive) relations with one another (see the sidebar titled Enregisterment and Peirce's Three Kinds of Iconicity).

Such entextualized images of personhood are themselves often transduced into prototypic images. Agha's (2007, pp. 198–99) seminal work on Received Pronunciation in Britain moves equally between novels and cartoons as vectors for the enregisterment of standard language, just as Inoue's (2006) formative discussion of Japanese “women's language” details the constitutive role

ENREGISTERMENT AND PEIRCE'S THREE KINDS OF ICONICITY

We can perhaps elaborate the imagistic basis of enregisterment in terms of Peirce's three types of iconicity: Gal & Irvine's (2019) diagrammatic schemata (contrast sets built out of axes of differentiation) are Peircean metaphors (iconic relations between grounds and interpretants, here, indexical repertoires and their metapragmatic stereotypy) which regiment and are actualized in diagrams (texts-in-context where there is an iconicity between indexically contiguous signs, qua text, and their object, here their enactable effects, themselves iconically redolent with the metaphors that regiment them). Furthermore, such diagrams “downshift” into Peircean images, what Gal & Irvine (2019) call “rhematization” (after Peirce's “rheme,” a sign whose interpretant construes its ground as iconic). In such cases, texts-in-context fetishistically imbue, by being metonymically reduced into, particular (quali)signs. Such indexical signs become emblematic shibboleths which are ideologically reanalyzed—indeed, naturalized—as performatively bearing some iconic essence that they are felt to embody (Calder 2018).

of photographs and drawings in advertising in transforming previously denigrated “schoolgirl speech” into prestigious “women’s language.” Inoue shows how the cotextualization of prestige commodities—visually displayed and linguistically described—and new voicing and looking strategies (with depicted feminine figures speaking to magazine readers in “schoolgirl speech”) innovated models of speaking/consuming subjectivity for new generations of Japanese women to align with, and eventually inhabit as their own (and later ironize and reject).

A burgeoning literature has expanded on these insights to look at the role of image-based media (film, television, photography, social media) in processes of speech enregisterment and their contestation: of dialect (Hillewaert 2015), class (Valentinsson 2022), indigeneity and primitiveness (Meek 2006, 2020; Swinehart 2012; Peterson 2017; Graham 2020), and race (Bucholtz 2011, Bucholtz & Lopez 2011, Wirtz 2014, Reyes 2017, Calhoun 2019, Canut 2019, Smalls 2020, Delfino 2021, Telep 2021).

Other scholars have focused more squarely on the enregisterment of images, that is, the way in which image-texts cohere insofar as their aesthetic features congruently index various metapragmatic stereotypes. For example, to recall our discussion of Bhojpuri cinema (Hardy 2014), the way in which a repertoire of signs—camerawork, lighting, *mise en scène*, editing style, sound design and music, linguistic register, and so forth—entextualized in a film (in some context, for some social domain) contrastively indexes, and iconizes, the industry in which it belongs [as Bhojpuri (versus Hindi)], the stereotypical kind of (“commercial”) director or producer who makes such (“vulgar”) films, the type of audience who watches them (young, male subaltern “front benchers”), their stereotypical reception practices (whistling and dancing along), and the space of their reception (run-down single-screen theaters). In such cases, the texture of image-texts is mediated by enregistered cultural models of (inter)textuality which render such texts indexically evocative of stereotypic social meanings (within a contrast set of other production formats, participation frameworks, identities, and spaces, as well as styles and narrative genres).

One recurrent enregistered style of representation that linguistic anthropologists of the image have productively explored is realism (Nakassis & Dean 2007, Gershon & Malitsky 2011, Pardo 2014, Chumley 2016, Ball 2017). What counts as realism is variable by medium, period, industry, genre, and so on, of course, though realisms as enregistered styles of representation are almost always ideologically anchored on denotational-referential grounds, drawing attention to a relation of fidelity between realist text and its object. Such a referentialist conceit is the basis for any range of (second-order) nonreferential (nonnarrative, nondiegetic) indexicalities—metafilmic stereotypes—that point to elements of their context (of production, circulation, reception, and the social identities of those involved therein). That ideological consciousness often effaces such social indexicalities (in favor of focusing on realist technique or “ontological” features of the medium) is, of course, part and parcel of the politics of naturalization that is central to realisms.

In the Tamil case I have written about elsewhere (Nakassis 2023a, pp. 146–93), enregistered signs of realism (long takes, handheld camerawork, continuity editing, naturalistic lighting in outdoor locations, nonprofessional actors, colloquial dialogue, etc.) do not simply make a claim to represent the world as it is. They also invoke, as indexically appropriate to the realist textuality they entextualize, types of production formats (as made by “serious” art-minded directors, produced by “alternative” studios) and participation frameworks (as made for middle-class audiences, who “receive” the text with silent attention and contemplative appreciation) in particular circuits of distribution and exhibition (international film festivals; multiplex theaters in high-end malls). Such so-called class films stand in diagrammatic contrast with unrealistic, so-called mass films (enregistered with more or less the same stereotypes as the Bhojpuri cinema discussed above).

Yet if this is the *register* of realism, we can also discern how realisms and their social indexicalities are also undergirded by conventionalized aesthetic *styles*; that is, realist texts are always also

Table 2 Three intertextual metasemiotics, orders of textuality, semiotic grounds. The red bold font emphasizes the key semiotic dimensions of each

Intertextual metasemiotic	Textual type	Semiotic ground of repertoire
<p>Narrative genres</p> <p>Registers</p> <p>Styles</p>	<p>denotational (narrative) texts</p> <p>interactional texts</p> <p>image (aesthetic) texts</p>	<p>as entextualized coherences of (contrastively organized) repertoire forms qua</p> <p>engenred symbols.</p> <p>enregistered (non-referential) indexes.</p> <p>enstyled qualisigns.</p>

entextualized by metapragmatic functions that regiment the cohesion of such films at the level of their aesthetic textuality. Such enstyled (to coin a very ugly word) signs—shot types, editing styles, lighting styles, and so on—give an affective feel for realist images (Ball 2017). (Such qualia are not constrained to the screen, of course, and we might note the silence and darkness of the theater, among other qualia, that contribute to the atmospheric, aesthetic feel of certain realisms.)

Not simply in their aesthetic and interactional textuality, however, realisms are also conventionalized as narrative genres, which regiment the texts that instantiate them through their cohesiveness as denotational texts (that is, as narratives; **Table 2**). In the Tamil case, for example, in the 1980s, narratives of “nativity” (pastoral rurality) and kinship drama were considered stereotypically realist, while by the 2000s, realism centered on the (urban) “reality” of caste and sexuality, often featuring violent plots with Byronic tragic heroes as victims of caste honor and crime.

Style, registers, and narrative genres are intertextual metasemiotics, in that they are cultural models that templatically regiment and construe the (denotational, interactional, aesthetic) cohesion of events of semiosis *as* texts as a function of some intertextual series which such texts indexically presuppose or entail (via their enstyled, enregistered, or engenred repertoire forms).² That is, a style, register, or narrative genre is a condition on the coherence *of* a text by serving as a condition of coherence *between* texts. Notice, as well, that every narrative genre presupposes a register that presupposes a style (just as every denotational text is borne by an interactional text undergirded by some image-text). Furthermore, narrative genre features may serve as enregistered signs (engenred narrative elements indexing certain interactional texts of production, circulation, reception), just as aesthetic styles (e.g., qualisigns of realism) may serve conventionalized (enregistered) indexical and symbolic (engenred) functions (certain styles appropriate to certain types of stories, types of makers, spectators, cinema halls, etc.).

At the same time, while such intertextual metasemiotics may be coordinately conventionalized and bundled with one another, they, and their elements, are also independent and detachable from one another. Hence, while lens flare—the product of light diffracted in a camera, producing streaks of light in the recorded image—in classical Hollywood studio realism was considered a mistake that distracted from illusionist involvement, by the 1960s, with a new generation of anti-Hollywood filmmakers, lens flare became a sign of authenticity, indexically linked to new repertoires of realist style and types of narratives but also types of audiences, filmmakers, exhibition locales, and so on. By the 2000s, lens flare had become so naturalized as a shibboleth of realist style that, as Ball (2017) points out, it could be deployed in animated fantasy films like *The Lego*

²The term “genre” here may be misleading since it typically captures more than denotational text (e.g., elements of interactional text such as participation frameworks; Briggs & Bauman 1992); here, however, I am less concerned with offering an account of genre *per se* than with analytically teasing out the intertextual metasemiotic regimenting and indexically invoked by the entextualization of denotational text, provisionally termed here “narrative genre.”

Movie (Lord & Miller 2014), where no actual lenses were used! Yet such usage in *The Lego Movie* was itself a citational callout to—indeed, a playful parody of—the “overuse” of lens flare by the science-fiction director J.J. Abrams, whose own creative style (Chumley 2016, pp. 122–57) as an auteur was enregistered to his person via his excessive use of lens flare.

A LINGUISTIC ANTHROPOLOGY OF...

A linguistic anthropology of images carries through the major theoretical project of linguistic anthropology from its inception: to open a wide horizon for the ethnographic study of semiosis in social life. It has made this possible through its pragmatic deconstruction of language (in culture, society, interaction, etc.), a gesture we continue by multiplying the empirical domains, such as images, to which our analytic lenses may be turned. Yet doing so also requires us to deconstruct these domains in turn. Hence, the aim of a linguistic anthropology of images is not to purify and isolate the image (or language, or...) as a type of signification or modality, to discover its uniqueness or essence, in that mode of medium-specificity thinking so familiar to various disciplines (language for linguistics, film for film studies, ...). Rather, our aim is to generalize from the particularities of our empirical cases (here, images) so as to formulate those semiotic principles, relations, and processes that exceed and traverse our objects of inquiry (image, language, ...). Just as our inquiries into language have led us beyond it, so too must our inquiries into images lead us beyond them as well, back to language (reconceptualized, to be sure) but also further afield as well.

What I have been describing, in short, is not just a linguistic anthropology of images but an image of linguistic anthropology itself, as a field continually multiplying its centers of gravity and horizons of inquiry, not in a mode of self-negation, abandonment, or centrifugal dispersal but as a collective, centripetal process of positive self-differentiation. This would be a linguistic anthropology of..., that ellipsis open to as many possibilities as there are possessors of the noun phrase, an open-ended set all linked together *as* linguistic anthropology.

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