

## Whorfian Pragmatics Revisited: Language anti-structures and performativist ideologies of language\*

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### Introduction

In his foundational essay on “Language Structure and Linguistic Ideology”, Silverstein (1979) sought to model language ideology as a kind of Whorfian pragmatics—to carve out the study of linguistic ideology as a domain for the comparative (or, as we say today, ‘typological’) study of language as a total social fact. His essay seeks to extend the Whorfian intuition concerning the relationship between grammatical categorial codings of language structural form and cultural beliefs about the nature of referred-to and predicated-about reality to the sociopragmatics of language broadly construed. The analogy takes the following form: If Whorf is concerned with the relationship between language structures and metasemantic ideologies of reference, Silverstein wants to uncover the motivational relationship between language structural constraint and metapragmatic ideologies of language.

The introduction of ‘linguistic ideology’ as an analytic category was part and parcel of Silverstein’s critique of a strain of thinking about language, still on the ascendant in 1979, which saw language, and language structure in particular, as ‘autonomous’ in a number of important senses—think here of the Chomskyan styled autonomy of ‘competence’ over ‘performance’, of syntactic pattern over semantic sense. The alternative vision of language which Silverstein presented in a series of publications written in the 1970s and early 1980s is, aptly enough for his Peircean inheritance, a triadic one; the study of language must attend to the mutual dependencies between semiotic-functional considerations (i.e. discourse [*parole*], token-level ‘usage’, type-level indexicality), language structural considerations (i.e. language specific organization of grammatical categories and their dependencies [*langue*]), and meta-semiotic processes (i.e. ideology, metapragmatic discourse/function). Though the three levels are analytically distinct, in linguistic sign types and tokens these functional levels always intersect and overlap.

While Silverstein seeks to “generalize Whorf’s penetrating insights from the plane of reference to the whole of language function”, he finds there “the same disjunction between ideology and structure ... which assimilates function to reference” (Silverstein 1979:194). Indeed, all of the examples upon which his argumentation is based involve the relationship between language structure, *as it intersects with the semiotic-function of*

*indexical reference*, and linguistic ideology. They focus, in other words, on linguistic sites of METAPRAGMATIC TRANSPARENCY (e.g. pronouns, explicit performatives) and linguistic ideologies associated with those domains (i.e. of honorification and “illocutionary force”, respectively).<sup>1</sup> All of the empirical cases which Silverstein’s essay draws upon—from T/V-pronominal systems to Javanese speech levels to speech act theory—are ones which thus involve a maximal telescoping between the triad of semiotic function, language structure, and ideology. In all these cases it is reference which serves as the semiotic glue dialectically linking language structure and linguistic ideology.

But is ideology constrained and refracted only by and through the referential functions of language? In what follows, I illustrate that the ideology-structure dialectic does not only play out in the orbit of linguistic reference. Rather, I argue that it is precisely where the nonreferential functions of tokens of linguistic types are decoupled from their discourse reference—and the structural functions of lexical sense and phonological form which underwrite them—that ideological conceptualization is most constrained, and then, in a performativist reading of pragmatic function.

### Discourse reference and the social pragmatics of honorifics

As a point of empirical departure let’s focus on cases of honorification. Honorifics have been particularly fecund for the study of the relationship between language structure and linguistic ideology because of the way in which language structural, semiotic-functional, and ideological concerns align in the total sociopragmatic phenomenon. In canonical honorification, nonreferential indexical function tends to presuppose (that is, rely upon) co-occurring referentially indexical functions. Lexical honorific systems, in particular, typically depend upon the reference of co-occurring linguistic forms to specify the focus of the honorific index (see Agha 2007:321, *infra*). We can see this by means of an example from a Sinhalese lexical honorific register employed in deferring to ordained Buddhist monks (after Chandralal 2010:271).

- |     |   |                                |                          |                                   |   |
|-----|---|--------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------------|---|
| (1) | a | <i>haamuduruwo</i><br>monk.hon | <i>daane</i><br>rice.hon | <i>waləndəṇəwa</i><br>eat.hon.IND | ‘The monk is eating rice.’<br>(HONORIFIC)   |
|     | b | <i>Taatta</i><br>Father        | <i>bat</i><br>rice       | <i>kanəwa</i><br>eat.IND          | ‘Father is eating rice.’<br>(NON-HONORIFIC) |

Take the verbs glossed as ‘to eat’. To simply employ a token of the non-honorific verb, *kanəwa*, does not risk incurring social sanction or reprimand, even when used in the co-presence of a monk. It is only where the referent of the subject of the verb is a Buddhist monk that utterances employing tokens of the verb are normatively judged as inappropriate. Thus both 1a. and 1b. are normatively appropriate utterances. In the Sinhalese Theravadan honorific register, nonreferential function is dependent upon co-occurring referential function. This is a characteristic feature of most lexical honorific registers (e.g. Thai, Tibetan, Nahuatl, Samoan, etc.); discourse reference conditions the pragmatic function of lexical variants. Inverting the Austinian notion of a ‘felicity

<sup>1</sup> To say that a linguistic category is ‘metapragmatically transparent’ is to say that the denotational content of the category specifies (i.e. metapragmatically regiments) the indexical function of tokens of the type. In the nominal domain, a 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> person pronoun denotes a speech participant role the occupant of which is referentially indexed by a token of the type. In the verbal domain, a metapragmatic verb denotes a speech act which a ‘felicitous’ token of the type accomplishes.

condition', we might say that discourse reference is a DEFEASANCE CONDITION on performative function in Sinhalese honorification.

Silverstein (1979) spends quite a bit of time discussing the ideological underpinnings which explain why honorific registers like Javanese speech levels and European pronominal address systems are, as he put it, "referentially-centered" (ibid. 231).<sup>2</sup> Here I want to contrast such referentially based pragmatic systems to a range of sociopragmatic phenomena comparable to canonical honorification except for the fact that pragmatic function seems to be decoupled from discourse reference. In particular, I want to contrast honorific registers of the Sinhalese type with what we might call, after Haviland 1979, AVOIDANCE REGISTERS (see also Kirton 1971:54).

### Pragmatic infeasibility and avoidance registers

Avoidance registers consist of a repertoire of words and expressions that substitute for another set of words and expressions ("everyday" words) in terms of their denotational functions in contexts where (or, for speakers, for whom) those words are tabooed. The best known exemplars are the so-called 'mother-in-law languages' of Aboriginal Australia, extensive lexical repertoires which substitute for everyday words in affinal co-presence. While such registers can indeed be employed referent-focally, their most hypertrophied occurrence is found in interactions where avoidance relations find themselves in each others co-presence. Here the function of pragmatic variants is wholly decoupled from discourse reference. Take, for instance, the Guugu-Yimidhirr affinal register, called by Haviland 'brother-in-law language' because this is the only close category of affinal kin who are normatively allowed to address one another, and then only by means of the special affinal register (examples after Haviland 1979:368-369).

- |     |   |   |                                 |                                     |                                       |
|-----|---|---|---------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| (2) | a | <i>Ngayu</i><br>1 <sup>st</sup> .sg.NOM | <i>mayi</i><br>food.ABS         | <i>buda-nhu</i><br>eat-PURP         | 'I want to eat'<br>(EVERYDAY SPEECH)  |
|     | b | <i>Ngayu</i><br>1 <sup>st</sup> .sg.NOM | <i>gudhubay</i><br>food.aff.ABS | <i>bambanga-nhu</i><br>eat.aff-PURP | 'I want to eat'<br>(AFFINAL REGISTER) |

Here, unlike the Sinhalese case, the choice of lexical pragmatic variant for the verb 'to eat' is not conditioned by the reference of associated predicate subject. To use *buda* in speech addressed to a brother-in-law (or merely in the co-presence of a parent-in-law) would be to court social sanction, regardless the identity of the co-textually determined discourse referent. A range of speech registers—from the *hlonipha* speech registers of Southern Bantu languages (Herbert 1990) to the 'pandanus languages' of highland New Guinea (Pawley 1992) to the deep sea (*haf*) fishing registers of the North Sea (Flom 1925)—exhibit a relational pragmatic functionality which is, as in the Guugu-Yimidhirr example, decoupled from discourse reference. I use the term "avoidance register" as a class designator—similar to "honorific register" (Agha 2007)—for the full range of socially stereotyped linguistic repertoires which share this feature of their pragmatic organization.

Particularly illustrative for seeing the sociopragmatic implications of this decoupling of pragmatics from reference is a cross-linguistically comparable set of

<sup>2</sup> "Ideology engages metapragmatically with functional<sub>2</sub> structure through the constitution of a referentially-based (or referentially-centered) functional<sub>1</sub> system, the constitution of which is a function<sub>2</sub>-changing (hence, structure-changing) process" (Silverstein 1979:231).

avoidance registers centered in the avoidance of personal names and homophones of those names (i.e. of the Southern Bantu *hlonipha*-type). Name and homophone avoidance registers are found on all continents (see Fleming [in press]), indexing a range of social relationships and identities (e.g. being involved in the sociolinguistic mediation of status hierarchies, affinal relationship, ritualized periods of mourning). One of the most interesting things about this geographically dispersed set of speech registers is the specificity of their linguistic organization, and the robustness of that pattern cross-linguistically. The examples in Table 1 are drawn from a range of culture-historically distinct affinal, and in the Tahitian case, kingly, avoidance registers. In these cases the names of affines (or potentate) and words phonetically similar to those names are all normatively proscribed in the speech of specific avoidance relations.

LANGUAGE	TABOOED NAME	PHONETICALLY SIMILAR FORMS ALSO AVOIDED	
<b>Tamil</b> (Pillai 1972:430)	<b>maasilaamani</b>	<b>maaqĩ</b> 'cattle'	<b>maangaay</b> 'mango'
<b>Tahitian</b> (Crowley & Bown 2010:209)	<b>pomare</b>	<b>poo</b> 'night'	<b>mare</b> 'cough'
<b>Sidamo</b> (Teferra 1987:46)	<b>dawasso</b>	<b>daa</b> 'to come'	<b>dantfa</b> 'good'
<b>Mongolian</b> (Humphrey 1978:94)	<b>tegsh</b>	<b>tegsh</b> 'level'	<b>tevsh</b> 'wooden platter'

Table 1: Name taboos and the avoidance of iconic phonetic sequences.

As an example of the phenomenon take the Mongolian case described by Caroline Humphrey (1978). In some rural Mongolian villages daughters-in-law were normatively expected to avoid the name of their father-in-law (and also sometimes of their mother-in-law) and of words homophonic with those names. The example I have provided is, in fact, the name of a mother-in-law, *tegsh*. There is a true homophone of this name, which means "level". But note that the word *tevsh*, which doesn't have an identical phonological form to the name, is also tabooed. To reiterate the point about pragmatics and reference made above, the daughter-in-law of Tegsh does not only avoid the word *tevsh* "wooden bowl", substituting it by the term *ix tavag* "large bowl", when referring to a wooden bowl co-textually or extra-linguistically associated with the mother-in-law. She avoids the term always and everywhere, regardless its reference. Though they function much like referent-focal lexical honorifics, indexing relative deference-entitlements of a third party that need not be co-present in the interaction, these avoidance register repertoires are not referentially dependent. This is because the everyday words which they substitute for have an INDEFEASIBLE PERFORMATIVITY with respect to discourse reference; that is, discourse reference does not cancel out, or defease, their social pragmatic function.

These name and homophone avoidance registers bear remarkable similarities to one another. First, in all of these cases it is personal names, rather than some other noun-phrase type, which are subject to avoidance; second, lexical targets of avoidance have a potentially dangerous and disruptive performativity in all contexts (regardless the co-presence of the taboo relation); third, the phonological form of the personal name conditions the avoidance of similar sounding forms. Importantly, this striking cross-linguistic pattern can only be satisfactorily explained by seeing how intertwined language-

structural and semiotic-functional factors constrain and motivate cross-linguistically convergent ideological conceptions of pragmatic function.

### **Why the social pragmatics of name types tend to decouple from token reference**

Let us begin with the question of why names are so commonly sites for the development of a social performativity which is not canceled out by discourse reference. A solution to this problem focuses on how the referential function of personal names motivates a metapragmatic model of their nonreferential function (see Fleming 2011 for full discussion). Names are unique among indexically referential noun-phrase types in having invariant reference. Other indexical noun-phrase types shift reference from token to token (hence the term, after Jespersen, “shifter” for pronouns). Unlike pronouns and anaphors, names have constant reference, not just across tokens of use, but—if Saul Kripke is to be believed—across all possible worlds.

Why should this semiotic functionally determined feature of the denotational category affect its sociopragmatic instantiation? The social pragmatic function of other person-referring noun-phrase types are typically judged as appropriate or inappropriate to context depending upon the reference of the token in question. French 2<sup>nd</sup> person singular *tu* may be felt to be appropriate when used in reference to one individual, while *vous* is expected for someone else. Appropriateness is not a type-level judgment, but a judgment based in TOKEN-REFERENCE. Because they have constant reference across tokens of use, personal names tend to motivate a different construal. Since all tokens have comparable sociopragmatic effects, pragmatic function comes to be conceptualized as an invariant property of the form TYPE itself. It is this metapragmatic construal of pragmatic function as associated with lexical type, as opposed to discourse tokens, that is all important here. There is an irony here; it is precisely because of the fact that a specific individual is always referred to by tokens of the form type that the relationship between token and referent becomes redundant, and thus can be dispensed with in modeling the pragmatic function of these forms. Once so conceptualized, however, tokens of the name are avoided regardless their reference.<sup>3</sup> Please note that the argument as framed is one which precisely involves the relationship between language structure, conceptualized in a semiotic-functional framework, and language ideology. The argument is that the structure of certain linguistic categories motivates different interpretations of their pragmatic function.

### **Diffloth’s distinction between lexical taboos and phonetic taboos**

The motivational relationship between reference and pragmatics may explain why personal names are tabooed more often than other word types—it does not, however, immediately make it clear why these taboos, but not others, condition the avoidance of phonetically similar forms. In order to answer this question I want to draw on a distinction made Gerard Diffloth some thirty years ago between lexical and phonetic taboos. Diffloth, perhaps the foremost scholar on Mon-Khmer languages, was describing an avoidance register employed by the Semai, an Aslian language group of peninsular Malaysia. The Semai believe that they should not name the animal that they, or anyone around them, is in the process of ingesting. (Note that, unlike the naming based avoidance registers, this is a context-dependent avoidance register.) If one does mention the animal being consumed its

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<sup>3</sup> For instance, post-mortem name taboo in California and the Pacific Northwest often extended (e.g. in Karok, Bella Bella) to the avoidance of tokens of the name when used in reference to individuals other than the deceased, though not to homophones of the name. Similarly, for affinal name taboo in the Caucasus (e.g. Abkhaz) [see Fleming, in press].

spirit will retaliate, for instance, by causing a stomach illness. What Diffloth (1980) notices is that the avoidance names for certain animals bear the real names of other animals, themselves tabooed. Thus, for instance, Malay civet has the avoidance name *kalak prahuu?* (which translates as “the Linsang of boats”), but the term *kalak* is itself the word for the linsang, and would be tabooed if used to denote linsang. The point is that it is a certain lexical form, a relationship between a phonological signifier and semantic signified, which is tabooed in this case—it is not the phonological form alone.

Diffloth compares such LEXICAL TABOOS with the kind of phonological substitution seen in the surround of English curse words. An interesting characteristic feature of cursing in a number of European languages are some of their sound symbolic aspects of the *jeez*, *jeepers*, *fudge* and *foeey* variety (see bottom left of Table 2). Extending Diffloth’s call to “examine linguistic taboo from strictly linguistic angle” (1980:157) we might ask if there is some principled cross-linguistic relationship between cases of lexical taboo, on the one hand, and cases of phonetic taboo, on the other. Sticking with the name taboo data that we have been focused on so far, we might ask if there is some similar structural-functional or semiotic-functional motivation lying behind the homophone effects observed for name tabooing, as in Mongolian, and phonetically derived substitutions for curse words, as in English (and Quebecois French [Vincent 1982]). With PHONETIC TABOOS, performative efficacy is ideologically conceptualized as immanent in the sonic substance of linguistic form independent of its lexical or structural sense properties. If lexical taboos (e.g. Semai animal terms) involve a pragmatic function which is not defeated by discourse reference, phonetic taboos (e.g. affinal homophones) involve a pragmatic function which is not defeated by semantic sense. To understand how such senseless performatives diachronically emerge in a dialectical relationship between structure, ideology, and pragmatic function, we must consider the nature of the relationship between reference-and-predication and performative function more broadly.

### **‘Explicit’ performativity and the pragmatic-metapragmatic dialectic**

The branch of Silverstein’s work devoted to metapragmatics helps to elucidate this question. Silverstein (1987) observes that Austin’s EXPLICIT PERFORMATIVITY (cf. performatives, like ‘*I promise you that...*’, that do what they say) is an inherently rationalizing, and thus ideological phenomenon, in its own right. In explicit performativity, the discursive rationalization of the speech act and the speech act itself are different functional expressions of one and the same signal form. Just as we saw for referent-focal honorifics above (see note 2), the pragmatic-metapragmatic dialectic has the tendency of ‘making explicit’ pragmatic phenomena. The problem is that in this process of rationalizing pragmatic-form, speakers rely upon the denotational functions of language (i.e. Austinian ‘constative’ function) the operations of which can only ever asymptotically (as in the ‘explicit’ cases) approach the indexical functions which they seek to rationalize. In explicit performativity, speakers telescope symbolic (i.e. metapragmatic reportive) and indexical (i.e. reflexively performative) functions. We know that this is the case because of a universal functional asymmetry seen in the use of elements of the metapragmatic lexicon. It is only some, not all, tokens of metapragmatic verbs (e.g. *promise*, *bequeath*, etc.) which function, and then only configurationally (i.e. in 1<sup>st</sup> person subject, 2<sup>nd</sup> person indirect object, present tense, collocations appropriate to context), in a performative

manner. Elsewhere these verbs function in a merely symbolic manner to refer-and-predicate about performative acts of various sorts without actually accomplishing them.<sup>4</sup>

One of the interesting things about verbal taboos as performative pragmatic types is that the asymmetry between report and act noted for metapragmatic verbs can be eroded. Take for instance the expression *the F-word* in English—not the word *fuck* but the expression *the F-word* itself. This is one of the more canonical exemplars of a productive construction type in English (i.e. the “the [X] word” construction, where ‘X’ is a variable filled by the name of the orthographic letter which begins the word which is avoided in the instance). The existence of such special, phonologically masked, delocutionary forms in English reflects the normative unmentionability of this and other curse words in at least some events of representing speech (Fleming and Lempert 2011).

PERFORMATIVE FUNCTION				REFERENT FOCUS	
SPEAKER FOCUS	ADDRESSEE FOCUS			DENOTATIONAL FUNCTION	
<i>Fuck!</i> (inter- jection)	<i>Fuck you!</i> (insult)	<i>Fuck it!</i> <i>him/her</i>	EMPH. ADV. <i>fucking</i>	NOUN	VERB
	<i>Fuck off!</i> (order to leave)	<i>them!...</i>	<i>_N</i>		
			EMPH. ADJ. <i>fucking</i>	<i>a fuck</i> (event of sex)	<i>to fuck</i> (have sex)
			<i>_N</i>		S[+pl] / A,O
“PRIMARY” PERFORMATIVE COLLOCATIONS (not “explicit” ones, note)			EMPH. INFIX <i>-fucking-</i>	DERIVED LEXEMES	
			<i>_/prim. stress</i>		
			EMPH. NOUN <i>the fuck</i>	<i>a fucker</i> (bad person)	<i>to fuck with</i> (mess with)
				[+human]	<i>to fuck up</i> (mess up)
DERIVED PRAGMATIC ALTERNATIVES				<i>a fuck up</i> (a failure)	<i>to fuck around</i> (mess around)
				[+ human]	
				METALINGUISTIC TERM	
				<i>the F-word</i>	---
				[+definite]	

Table 2: The word *fuck* as an example of a rigid performative.  
(Area enclosed by dotted line indicates domain of denotational function;  
solid line is domain of performative function.)

The performative infeasibility of the F-word (i.e. *fuck*) as a pragmatic type erodes the capacity of tokens of the type to function symbolically in metapragmatic reports of speech

<sup>4</sup> It is important that we highlight the historical implication. Universally speakers have tended to formally assimilate the pragmatic act and its description, whether by lexicalizing pragmatic types (as with delocutionary verbs; cf. Austin’s “primary performatives”) or by rank-shifting metapragmatic verbs into ‘explicitly’ performative functions. The lexicon of any given language is always already the product of a dialectical, reference-centered, process of ideological rationalization; the “cultural structuration” of language is not only to be found at linguistic peripheries (cf. Evans 2003).

activity.<sup>5</sup> After Fleming 2011, I call such pragmatically infeasible types, RIGID PERFORMATIVES.

If coincidence of metapragmatic and pragmatic form (itself always already an ideologico-diachronic effect! [see note 4]) ensures that a referential function will always be immanent in explicit performative utterances, the erosion of the metapragmatic reportive capacities of rigid performatives suggests precisely the opposite consequence (see note 5 on the morphosyntactic and semantic flexibility of English curse words). Sticking with the case of the F-word (see Table 2), we can see that the semantic content associated with pragmatic form is eroded at the level of structural function (e.g. the relaxing of constituency constraints) as well as in the polysemy of its lexical semantics (e.g. *to fuck* [*up/with/over/around*]). So too is denaturing of language structural regimentation of the lexical type apparent at the phonological level, given that pragmatically muted forms are typically derived on phonological rather than semantic analogy to offending targets (e.g. *fudge*, *fooey*, *frig*, *flipping* as substitutes for the F-word). And here, I think, we find ourselves with a phenomenon analogous in important respects to the homophone effects noted for personal name taboos.

### From explicit to rigid performatives

As we have seen for name and homophone avoidance registers, phonologically similar but semantically unrelated forms (i.e. homonyms) become secondary targets of avoidance. Though euphemisms for English curse words are actively employed, rather than avoided, their phonetically based paradigmatic alternation with curse words obeys the same principle as that of tabooed names and their homophones. Phonetically similar forms achieve analogous pragmatic functions to the curse words that they substitute for, but not analogous semantico-referential ones. Compare Sarah Palin's (2013) tweeting *Unflippingbelievable* (a graded register downshift from F-word infixed *unfuckingbelievable*) to the infelicity of *\*They were flipping in the Lincoln bedroom* or *\*The malware fudged up my computer*. The expressions phonetically iconic with curse

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<sup>5</sup> Note that even where we do employ tokens of the offending form in reporting acts of verbal abuse, we need to use a matrix verb of speaking along with its quotative complement to report even 'primary performative' (i.e. "Fuck you!") acts of uttering the F-word. Compare the function of the verb *fuck* in "He fucked me [over]" to the function of *promise* in "He promised me." The token of *promise* functions in a wholly symbolic ('constative') manner to describe a highly specific social act, itself potentially accomplishable by a token of the form in question. Contrastingly, it is the indexical ('performative') function of the token of *fuck* which is dominant in "He fucked me [over]", the only difference between this construction and the 'primary performative' being that the pragmatic function has been re-centered to a speaker-referent ["he ... me"] focused function. The meager symbolic function which still remains is not a metapragmatic one (it doesn't describe a speech act involving the F-word), but rather is a highly abstract / backgrounded semantic content (set against the heightened / foregrounded pragmatics of the form) of the kind seen in referent-lowering devices elsewhere (cf. Keating 1998 on Pohnpeian humiliatives; Silverstein 1979:223 on *krama andap*). Not only are the metapragmatics of the F-word anomalous, so too is the syntax of its privileged 'primary performative' construction (compare "Fuck you!", rather than *\*"I [hereby] fuck you!"*, to *"I [hereby] promise you."*). The morphosyntactic flexibility (cf. in-*fuckin'*-fixing) and sense-compositional abstractness (cf. "and shit" as a general extender à la "and stuff" [Joe Kessler, p.c.]) of English curse words can all be seen as features which arise from the semiotic-functional fact that these are pragmatic types whose symbolic functions cannot manifest in isolation from their pragmatic ones.



words do not felicitously substitute for the semantic functions of their counterparts, but only occur in exclusively pragmatic paradigmatic slots.<sup>6</sup>

So if we compare canonical explicit performatives to rigid performatives, we see that the functional asymmetry noted for the former is precisely reversed in the case of the latter. In the case of explicit performatives the pragmatic (= performative) function can never occur in isolation from the semantic (= constative) function, though the semantic function can occur in isolation from the pragmatic one (e.g. as in 3<sup>rd</sup> person metapragmatic reports, cf. “She promised him” versus “I promise you”). For rigid performatives, however, the semantic function can never occur in isolation from the pragmatic function. (Note that the pejorative semantics of the derived forms in Table 2 [e.g. *fuck up/around/over/with*] precisely depend upon co-occurring pragmatic function.) The pragmatic function, however, can occur in isolation (e.g. the F-word as interjection or intensifier). Importantly, phonetically based variants only occur in paradigmatic slots which are filled by forms which have exclusively performative functions. Speaking as if these were functional tiers hierarchically ordered with respect to one another, we might say that the denotational function of metapragmatic verbs dominates their performative functions, while for rigid performatives the performative function dominates the denotational one (see Table 3 for a schematization of this contrast). We might call this the ‘pragmatics-dominates-semantics’ configuration. It is here, where pragmatic function is independent of denotational function, that we find phonetic effects. The implication: the denotational function of rigid performatives is regimented by a dually patterned phonemic representation (i.e. a lexical form), but their performative function is not.

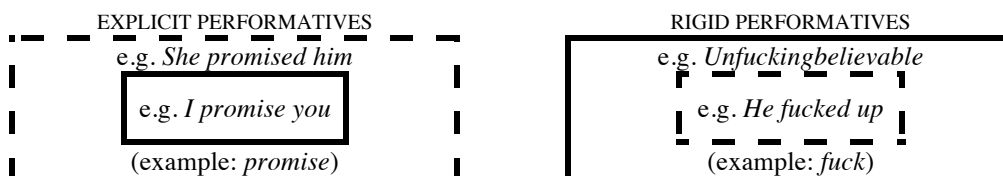


Table 3: Hierarchical relationship between performative and denotational functions for different kinds of linguistic types as revealed by the functional distribution of their tokens.

(Area enclosed by dotted line indicates domain of denotational function;  
solid line is domain of performative function.)

### Why pragmatics of context independent taboos tend to decouple from semantic sense

We are now in a position to see that the phonetically based pragmatic processes which we began with (see Table 1) are also the product of rationalizing, language ideological, sociopragmatic diachronies. In the ‘pragmatics-dominates-semantics’ configuration, all tokens of a type have performative functions, but only some tokens have semantico-referential ones. This occurs not only with curse words and their phonetic substitutes, but also in name and homophone avoidance registers—a range of tokens whose types share no

<sup>6</sup> The one exception to this generalization is the pronunciation of the name of the orthographic letter « F », which can felicitously occur across the functional spectrum, from ‘primary’ performative (*Eff you!*), to semantically vacuous referent focused (*...an effing nightmare...*), to derived referent-lowering denotational functions (*Stop effing around!*). This seems to precisely be a reflection of its capacity to occur with an exclusively metapragmatic function (*the eff/F-word*), hence its placement outside of the solid lined box in Table 2. In essence, the *F* of *the F-word* is a renovated metapragmatic-pragmatic form—it may itself become a rigid performative in the future.

semantic or referential core nevertheless produce similar pragmatic effects. It seems that this re-ordering of functional orders (i.e. performative function over denotational function) is the motivated ideological rationalization of a situation in which performative infeasibility is a property of all tokens of a type *independent of context*.

+/-CONTEXT DEPENDENT	+	<div style="text-align: center;">[ + ]</div> Australian ‘mother-in-law languages’, Semai animal register, Kewa ‘pandanus language’	
	-	<div style="text-align: center;">[ - ]</div> Caucasus affinal registers, Karok post-mortem register	<div style="text-align: center;">[ - ]</div> Mongolian in-law register, English curse words

Table 4: Context-dependence of infeasible performativity across avoidance register types. (Shading indicates cases where phonetically based avoidance occurs.)

In Table 4 we contrast a variety of avoidance registers not centered around name-tabooing (e.g. Aboriginal Australian ‘mother-in-law languages’, Semai animal register) with name taboo-derived avoidance registers. The key unifying condition which stands behind phonetic taboos, which can be seen in both the cases of name and homophone avoidance registers and for English curse words, is that these are pragmatic types whose performatively infeasible character is not context-dependent—any and all tokens of these expression types have performative effects.<sup>7</sup> For instance, all tokens of the F-word count as acts of cursing. This doesn’t mean, of course, that the F-word is avoided in all contexts. Among friends it may make an exaggerated appearance, but that is precisely because it still has a pragmatic effect. This is wholly distinct from the example of the Guugu-Yimidhirr verb “to eat” *buda*, which as we saw has a performative effect, potentially rupturing of social relations, transgressive and embarrassing, but only when uttered in the co-presence of one’s in-laws. Outside of in-law co-presence, *buda* just means “to eat”; it is pragmatically neutral.

Here again there is a structure-ideology relationship at work. The phonetic fallout of rigid performativity reflects and reproduces a conceptualization of pragmatic function which, divorced from (lexical-)sense and (discourse-)reference, is left only with the phonetic substance of offending tokens to anchor its rationalizations. Here phonological form is the only remaining defeasance condition on performative function. But if the structural function characteristic of the phoneme is that it “is a denotationally diacritic sound category” (Agha 2007:108) capable of distinguishing semantic meanings (cf. minimal pairs of the *bit/pit* variety), in these purely performative paradigms (cf. phonetic pairs of the *shoot/shucks* variety) we encounter a phonological function freed of the structural constraint of the duality of patterning. The ideological projection is clear: *Where denotational difference fails to regiment the pragmatic function of phonemic form, performativity tends to be conceptualized as a manifestation of the phonetic substance of material tokens*. In name and homophone avoidance registers, it is this slippage from sense

<sup>7</sup> Remember from our discussion above that the non-referential function of personal names is so often conceptualized as being context-independent because it tends to be metapragmatically modeled on the context-independence of the referential function of personal names (as opposed to e.g. pronouns).

into sound that motivates and rationalizes the avoidance of lexical types whose tokens are phonologically iconic with tokens of the tabooed name. While tabooing affects lexical types qua phonological forms, it is rationalized in terms of phonetic tokens.

While a structure-ideology dialectic can thus be appreciated in these cases it should also be clear that this is not a deterministic relationship. There are plenty of cases where names are not tabooed, or where names which are tabooed do not condition phonetic avoidances (e.g. the cases from Northern California or the Caucasus cited in Table 4). This serves as crucial evidence for the intermediation of just such a metapragmatic or language ideological level between token-level patterning of ‘usage’ and type-level ascriptions of pragmatic functions.

<i>Defeseance conditions on the pragmatic type</i>	Referent-focal non-honorifics	Lexical Taboos	Phonetic taboos
DISCOURSE REFERENCE	+	–	–
SEMANTIC SENSE	+	+	–
PHONOLOGICAL FORM	+	+	+
	e.g. Sinhala honorifics	e.g. Semai animal terms	e.g. Mongolian in- law homophones

Table 5: Defeasance conditions on pragmatic function across three register types.

### Conclusion

The goal of this brief paper has been to show that across a number of culture-historically distinct speech communities kinds of speech which are understood as having an ‘inherent’ and unavoidable performativity exhibit pragmatic properties not functionally regimented, as with comparable sociopragmatic phenomena, by a number of linguistic structures and structural-functions central to reference-and-predication. In particular, I have focusing on how three domains of language structure—phonological form, structural-sense, and discourse-reference—do or do not succeed in regimenting pragmatic function (see Table 5). Illustrating this simple correlation, my strong claim has been that breakdowns of structural regimentation manifest in usage do not merely reflect the ‘underlying’ functional organization of pragmatic types but are actively informed by, and dialectically reproduce, performativist ideologies of language. The argument is thus that pragmatic functionality is read against, or off of, violability of structural parameters—that such, if you will, anti-structures dialectically motivate performativist ideologies of language.

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\* Acknowledgments: My thanks, first and foremost, to the SALSA XXII conference organizers and participants for making our time in Austin such a pleasure. My gratitude to James Slotta for his work on this manuscript, and in particular for helping me with the framing of the argument. This paper was initially developed out of a series of letters which I wrote to James in 2011. The arguments concerning the phonetic effects of verbal taboos and their relationship to the denaturing of the symbolic functions of rigid performatives were first developed for a paper, "Senseless Speech Acts", presented to the Semiotics Workshop at the Department of Anthropology at the University of Chicago in 2011. My thanks to the workshop participants, and in particular to the discussant, Britta Ingebreton, for generous, insightful and stimulating comments.