

Ahearn, L. (2001). Language and Agency. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 30, 109-137.
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Synopsis:

In this paper, Ahearn defines the term agency, while also examining and critiquing how it has been defined by other scholars and areas of study. She does so to analyze the way that agency can enact social change. The frequency in defining and discussing agency has increased in recent years, Ahearn believing this to be due to the rise in social movements and the inextricable link they have with personal and societal agency. Many philosophers – particularly those that subscribe to “action theory – define agency as a synonym of free will. Ahearn contends that this does not take into account the influence of culture on human actions. Other scholars discuss agency as an act of resistance; while oppositional agency exists, e.g. in the feminist movement, a more nuanced understanding of agency must be used to include the multiplicity of motivations behind human actions. This leads Ahearn to discuss the value of practice theory, which examines how society impacts human action and vice versa. The interplay between these two things results in a cycle of society mimicking human action and human action mimicking society, a form of structuration. Because of this cycle, the question as to how social change ever occurs is raised. This is the goal of practice theorists, to determine how actors are able to transform the systems that produced them. One way this is done is through language. Ahearn discusses how linguistic anthropologists study language to determine how different cultures convey agency. Examples of linguistic features can be found and linked to effective and ineffective attempts at social action.

Key Concepts

- **Agency:** “the socioculturally mediated capacity to act” (p. 112).
- **Language:** “a form of social action, a cultural resource, and a set of sociocultural practices” (p. 110).
- **Practice Theory:** “a theory of the relationship between the structures of society and culture on the one hand, and the nature of human action on the other” (p. 117).

Key Quotes

- “Language does not merely reflect an already existing social reality; it also helps to create that reality” (p. 111).
- “Given this recursive loop consisting of actions influenced by social structures and social structures (re)created by actions, the question of how social change can occur is crucial” (p. 117).
- “‘The reality of any hegemony in the extended political and cultural sense, is that, while by definition it is always dominant, it is never either total or exclusive’ (Williams 1977, p. 113)” (p. 120).

Essential Question

- How are different pronouns used in American society to give agency to the gender nonconforming?