Responsibility, Evidence, and Ideology: Conversations Inspired by Judith T. Irvine, Parts 1 & 2
Invited Sessions (In-Person and Virtual)
Society for Linguistic Anthropology

(2-0900) Thurs 18 Nov 2:00 PM-3:45 PM Part 1
   Zoom: https://umich.zoom.us/j/91029377835
(2-0890) Thurs 18 Nov 4:15 PM - 6:00 PM Part 2
   Zoom: https://umich.zoom.us/j/91824101680

INDIVIDUAL PAPER ABSTRACTS

PANEL 1

Speech inscribes itself in matter for all time_: early French proposals for museums of recorded speech
Richard Bauman

My contribution to this session in honor of Professor Judith Irvine speaks to two longstanding interests among the many that have shaped Judy's scholarship in the course of her distinguished career: language and materiality and the intellectual history of linguistic thought. More specifically, I will explore ways in which early speculation concerning the affordances of phonographic sound recording, its capacity to overcome the ephemerality of spoken language, generated proposals for the establishment of museums of language. i focus on two of the most systematic projects for the establishment of museums of language in the early decades of the 20th century, both proposed by French linguists, M. L. Azoulay and Ferdinand Brounot. In Azoulay's view, the phonograph had achieved the capacity to "fix, preserve and reproduce" sound, fundamental operations of "all true science." Azoulay envisioned that phonographic museums (*musees phonographiques)* would provide a basis of attack for the problems of "linguistic anthropology" (*anthropologie linguistique*, the first use of the term of which I am aware). Brunot, a professor of the history of the French language at the Sorbonne, published a number of articles in which he proposed the creation of a Museum of Speech (*Musee de la Parole*) based upon systematically recorded and documented sound recordings. Brunot cast the special capacity of the phonograph explicitly in terms of its materialization of the intangible word. With the advent of sound recording, he observes, "speech inscribes itself in matter for all time."

Memes, Emojis, and Text: The Semiotics of Differentiation in Sri Lankan Tamil Digital Publics
Christina P. Davis

Judith T. Irvine's theorizing of the semiotic processes of differentiation in communication provides an ideal framework for analyzing multimodal social media interactions that involve images and text. In this paper, I will investigate how commonality and difference are negotiated in Facebook discussions around posted images of Tamil signboard errors in Sri Lanka. Public signs are required by law to be in Sinhala, Tamil, and English, but there are often errors in the Tamil content, images of which are circulated online as emblems of the incomplete implementation of the nation's trilingual policies. Drawing on Irvine's (2001) conceptualization of linguistic and non-linguistic signs in relation to a system of distinction, I demonstrate that although the Tamil language is crucial to a transnational Tamil identity, insider status in these groups is not contingent on the use of Tamil as a code, but on expressing alignments toward Tamil blunder memes as tokens of types, which, in turn, reflects a common regime of value (Gal and Irvine 2019). While participants risk getting called out or questioned when they leave comments with textual-denotational content, the use of emojis and emoji reactions are powerful in producing shared affective alignments that create a sense of a common experience among participants from diverse ethno-religious, regional, class, gender, and sociolinguistic backgrounds. This paper seeks to understand how linguistic and visual signs become valued and revalued in relation to the affordances of social media and transnational Tamil digital publics.

How do Reasonable Persons Act? Responsibility and Evidence in U.S. Criminal Justice
Sonia Das

When Judith Irvine and her late collaborator, Jane Hill, published their ground-breaking co-edited volume in 1992, they highlighted the critical role of oral discourse in the "allocation of responsibility, the marshalling of evidence, and the rhetoric of claims and persuasion" across diverse institutional and everyday contexts (Hill and Irvine 1992, 3). Among other insights, this scholarship demonstrated how attributions of agency are deeply entangled with the dialogic processes through which utterances are interpreted and evaluated. However, in the changing context of the U.S. legal system, oral testimonial evidence is often supplemented and even replaced by evidence derived from non-speech sources; this has the effect of complicating the determination of criminal responsibility and intent. Moreover, although officially the U.S. legal system conceptualizes "responsibility [as being] relative to age and to 'insanity'" (ibid 21), there are also technocratic models of responsibility informing the question, "how might a reasonable person belonging to a specific age cohort act in a given situation?" Drawing on my observations of DUI and drug trials, interviews with prosecutors and defense attorneys, and bodycam videos of police officers conducting routine traffic stops in a mid-sized Southern U.S. city, I explore how responsibility for misdemeanors is evaluated through linguistic and non-linguistic evidence to highlight how debates about criminal justice in the U.S. have their roots in longstanding language ideologies.

Vernacular contestations. Deconstructing and reimagining boundaries in African linguistics.
Sarah Hillewaert

A common thread through much of Judith Irvine's work has been the construction of boundaries – considerations of the ways in which linguistic and social differences are simultaneously made and unmade. Approaching the question of boundary-making from within African and colonial linguistics, this paper discusses the historical and contemporary imaginings of unity and difference among speakers of Swahili vernaculars in Eastern Africa. The Swahili language, I suggest, defies conceptions of "ethnolinguistic units" in more than one way. It refers to a set of linguistic practices that are recognizable as belonging to the same "unit," yet simultaneously signal a complex set of different social and political identities. In this paper, I consider Kiswahili's contrived colonial standardization process and the state-indorsed inequality it created. I highlight contemporary speakers' resistance to the postcolonial regimes of values standardization imposed. Through the analysis of conversational data among residents of Lamu Island (Kenya), I demonstrate how Swahili speakers reinvigorate imagined historical vernacular differences and the stances they take through their mobilization. The ideological value of such vernacular differences, I argue, challenges us to deflect the focus on "origins" in African linguistics to consider the role of historical imaginings in contemporary speakers' notions of identity and social relations (Irvine 2008).

The Relative Pervasiveness of Ideological Differentiations
Charles H. Zuckerman

Binary contrasts are facts of life (Irvine and Gal 2000; Gal and Irvine 2019), but how can we assess and capture the relative pervasiveness of one contrast or another? In the Nam Noi Watershed of Laos, speakers of several languages (namely Lao, Bru, Kri, Vietnamese, and Saek) differentiate "heavy" and "light" sounds (Zuckerman and Enfield 2020). They use the contrast both to distinguish suprasegmental differences within a given language (for example, to describe the difference between forms with similar segments but different lexical tones or phonation types) and to distinguish cognate forms from different dialects and / or languages. In this paper, I focus on interactions during linguistic elicitations, tracing when people invoke the contrast and what prompts them to do so. I show that my materials help disentangle several dimensions of the relative ubiquity of ideological differentiations.

Status and style: JTI and the Comparative Eye
Susan Gal

Judy Irvine is good with words. When we were feverishly working together to finish the introduction to our book, we searched for ways of labeling the kind of comparison we admired in the work of our scholarly ancestors, and the kind that we vehemently abjured. Judy contributed the term for the good kind: situated relationality. Comparison is the oldest project of anthropology and we describe the good kind semiotically in the book: It recognizes comparison as what everyone practices – not only anthropologists. Irvine's early essay "Status and Style in Language" in the *Annual Review of Anthropology* (1985) did not yet use that label, but it asked the right comparative questions in a provocative way. My current project pursues comparison by returning to two bilingual sites – one in Austria and the other in Hungary – where I have done long-term fieldwork. These towns speak the same two languages, and are only 350 km apart. Yet, viewed semiotically and with the perspective of situated relationality, they are profoundly different. This paper outlines why their statuses and styles, ideologies and sociolinguistic patterns are so divergent.

PANEL 2

Ambiguity in Signs of Dementia
Susan U. Philips

Cognitive changes associated with aging bring about changes in language use and affect how collaboration takes place in the process of face to face interaction. Two such changes are well recognized. They entail their own metapragmatics as well as distinctive interactional manifestations. These are problems with word retrieval and repetition in speech. Both are ambiguous signs in that both occur in most if not all people's speech, raising the phenominological issue of how people distinguish speech related to aging from speech not related to aging. In addition, in the metapragmatics about these phenomena, word retrieval problems are not seen as in themselves a sign of dementia (defined by some as abnormal cognition relative to a person's age), while some forms of repetition are considered in common sense constructions of reality as the most obvious and convincing evidence of dementia, a kind of shibboleth of dementia.

Systematic Conventionality: How Kajrat Became an Idiot
Ujin Kim

My ethnographic research among the Kazak nomads of Kyzyl Tas village in the Chinese Altai finds that honorific speech is associated with the ethics of modesty. Rather than trying to de-naturalize the indexical link between speech forms and ethical notions, my aim is to examine how the link is made to seem natural to Kyzyl Tas herders. Inspired by Irvine's 1990 paper "Registering Affect," the present paper emphasizes that the *systematic conventionality* of a cultural scheme enables a certain linguistic form to consistently invoke a certain ethical virtue. Quite separately from a person's real moral intention, such conventions "nevertheless represent the resources the person has to draw on for [ethical] display, the terms in which his or her behavior will be interpreted by others" (Irvine 1990: 131) in a given interaction. To demonstrate this point, I analyze a few separate instances of talk among Kyzyl Tas herders where Kajrat, a herdsman in his thirties with a conspicuous tendency to speak less deferentially, is labeled "idiot" (*zhyndy*). They share one thing in common – Kajrat's departure from some idealized visions of communicative behaviors involving the notion of respect. The plain speech style is so tightly linked to the prevailing stereotypical image of a morally negligent person – who is by nature arrogant, uncouth, coarse, uncivilized, childish, impulsive, inattentive, clueless, silly, and the like – that it becomes difficult, if not impossible, for other people around him to interpret his speech behavior otherwise.

Shadows and Mirrors: Spatial and Ideological Perspectives on Sign Language Competency
Erika Hoffmann-Dilloway

Irvine's "shadow conversations" (1996) sharpens attention to how conjectures about past and future moments in a chain of discourse events inform distribution of participant roles and other details of a given interaction. This paper explores how shadow conversations inform the significance(s) of shifts in perspective involved in using a sign language. In my field-sites, signers sometimes "sign along" when being addressed, to enhance and confirm their understanding of a stretch of discourse. Some reproduce signs from the visual perspective of the person addressing them (copying); others reproduce signs from their own perspective (mirroring). Signers often conjecture that mirroring suggests an addressee's relative lack of experience with signing, evoking shadow conversations conspicuous by their assumed non-occurrence. Thus, perspective here refers both to signers' relative viewpoints on sign forms in interactive space and to "clusters of conventional conjectures, indexical of personae" (Irvine and Gal 2019:99)).

The paper's "centerpiece" (Irvine and Gal 2019) is a conversation I had with a deaf Maltese groundskeeper that was derailed by my unfamiliarity with a sign for "olive." The groundskeeper is left-handed; I am right-handed. As the production of bilaterally asymmetrical signs varies according to handedness, while I signed along with his efforts to define "olive," I occasionally formally appeared to mirror his signing. I analyze his resulting playful manipulation of perspective (mirrors and shadows), to project onto me a range of personas as an in/competent signer, and argue that such social-spatial play can be mined to expand the visuospatial metaphors we use to describe semiotic processes.

Embodied Interactions: Caste, Personhood, and Senses of Humor
Nikolas Sweet

This paper unpacks Western linguistic ideologies of laugher, humor, and the sense of humor using approaches developed by Judith Irvine in the field of linguistic anthropology. One of Irvine's great contributions as a scholar was to further a semiotics of language, performance, and differentiation that took seriously material, embodied differences in people. While studying the verbal creativity of increasingly mobile migrants in West Africa as Irvine's graduate student, I came across an interactional genre of joking relationships in which interlocutors could insult and tease one another based on correspondences between particular patronyms, ethnic associations, and generations. Through this, migrant strangers placed themselves within increasingly mobile social networks in a boomtown region of southeastern Senegal. While Western approaches might view these routines as forms of "humor" and predicated upon a "sense of humor", I came to discover that these notions—and even laughter itself—were subject to situated views of personhood and performance. One's "sense of humor" is a highly prized attribute in the West and implies a sensibility in which subjective distinctions reflect an individual's personality. Even laughter in the West is often associated with "humor" rather than tasked with the more momentous work of mediating social relations. These notions thus reveal certain linguistic ideological assumptions through which talk-in-interaction is mapped onto responsibility, performance, and personhood. Drawing on my work in southeastern Senegal, this paper shows how embodied understandings of caste and the "sense of humor" as personality characteristic carry broader implications for studying language in performance.

What's wrong with this picture? The reception and production of the sociolinguistic self
Kathryn Woolard

In social indexicality and rhematization processes, typifications of linguistic forms derived from earlier social encounters (experienced, reported, or imagined) are projected by listeners as personal qualities of other speakers perceived to use similar forms, creating socially consequential effects for those speakers. But when and how do such social semiotics prospectively affect a perceiver's *own s*peech? Linguistic anthropology has long rejected Saussure's classic representation of communication as two talking heads mirroring each other. Nonetheless, reception and production sometimes appear to be symmetrical in our explanations of linguistic variation and language choice as agentive, whether in terms of identities, personae, or stances. Do our analyses inadvertently imply a Saussurean vision of communication that

belies our more general insistence on the perspectival anchoring of language ideology? This talk proposes that some theory of the sociolinguistic self is an implicit link in the ideological chain between the reception and production of socially indexical signs, and that there is more than one such possible theory of self. Empirical examples illustrate a theory of self that casts a primordial linguistic coherence cast as natural, inhibiting the fluid variation and translanguaging often discussed and sometimes celebrated in contemporary sociolinguistic studies. I consider the relation of such an ideologically natural self to Gal and Irvine's (2019) notion of blockage.

When Baby Talk Isn't Cheap: Economies of Talk in Childhood
Elinor Ochs & Tamar Kremer-Sadlik

In her article "When talk isn't cheap: the political economy of language" Irvine (1989) emphasizes that codes as indexical of relative power and talk as a form of labor are essential to the exchange-value and efficacy of market transactions. Irvine traces the transition across fields from conceptualizing language as a system of signs apart from the material world to embracing "the material and historical conditions of linguistic performance." This presentation laminates a developmental perspective on to Irvine's thesis, detailing how consequential economies of talk begin in infancy. Beyond acquiring linguistic forms varying in symbolic capital, infants are routinely positioned in informal participant frameworks and seemingly casual language games that lie at the heart of the inner workings of diverse political economies. Integrating Irvine's (1979) distillation of formal public and informal private communicative events, we offer developmental substance to the idea that ideologies and practices of informality itself are economically nuanced from birth. Infants' experience of informal sociality primes them to naturalize economically consequential interactional frameworks and participant roles. The presentation examines capitalism's formation of the bourgeois nuclear family household in ways that privilege informal dyadic interactions with an infant or toddler routinely positioned as 'speaker' and 'addressee' in partnership with a parent, usually the mother. The sedimentation of the bourgeois parent-child conversational dyad may be an overlooked democratizing result of the Industrial Revolution, one that re-positioned the young child as primary interlocutor, with profound developmental and societal effects.