

# The limits of thematization

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## Abstract

A fundamental capacity of language is its reflexivity. But not every aspect of language is equally accessible to being reflected upon. Michael Silverstein's 1981 paper, the "Limits of Awareness," set the terms of this discussion in linguistic anthropology with his study of speakers' "awareness" of pragmatic forms and their corresponding capacity to talk about them. His notion of differential "awareness" of aspects of language has since been foundational to linguistic-anthropological understandings of language ideologies. Here we consider Silverstein's argument with reference to our research in Laos, exploring the limits of metalinguistic discourse. We argue that the apparent constraints on our capacity to talk about aspects of language do not evidence limits of *awareness* of elements of language, but rather constraints on our ability to *thematize* those elements, that is, to bring them into joint attention. The central issue is *thematization*, and the relation of interest is a relation of joint attention between speakers. Metalanguage is thus constrained not (only) by psychological limits but by the social and semiotic limits on what people can bring *into mutual focus* within interactions. To present our framing of the issue and show what it helps us see, we distinguish two kinds of thematization and describe their subtypes, affordances, and constraints. We then demonstrate how social conventions—broadly understood—can circumvent these constraints, allowing people to thematize otherwise difficult to thematize forms.

## INTRODUCTION

Michael Silverstein's 1981 paper, the "Limits of Awareness" (henceforth LoA), has had a profound impact on how linguistic anthropologists explore and talk about native speaker metalinguistic capacity. LoA's title framed the problem as one of *awareness* and what limits it.<sup>1</sup>

Accordingly, readers of LoA often take the argument to be about what individuals are able to *detect* in and in turn *think about* their languages, as the mentally-oriented terms “awareness” and “aware of” suggest.<sup>2</sup> The dimensions Silverstein identified have, for instance, been treated as “structuring condition[s] of the *consciousness of pragmatic functions*” (Schieffelin, Woolard, and Kroskrity, 1998, 13, emphasis added), as distinct from structuring conditions of *discourse about pragmatic functions*.

But LoA also often pulls in another direction, as Silverstein considers not only the limits of our capacity to think about language, but also how easily we can talk about it. Our view is that this latter concern—crucial for Silverstein, but occluded at times by the paper’s titular notion of “awareness”—directs us to the core of the matter.

In what follows, we explore these issues with reference to a contrast that people in the Nakai Nam-Theun (NNT) protected area in rural Laos make between ‘heavy sounds’ and ‘light sounds.’ Speakers in the area use versions of this contrast in several languages to refer to the suprasegmental features of those languages, for example, lexical tones in Lao. More to our point here, we have found that speakers who grew up in the NNT seem especially adept at referring to suprasegmentals like tone when compared with Lao speakers in other parts of Laos.

How are we to make sense of the fact that people in the NNT protected area seem more “aware” of such linguistic features than do speakers living sometimes just a few miles away? What allows for local “testimony” in one multi-lingual community, but not the other?

These seemingly simple questions encourage us to rethink both the problem of the limits of awareness and our approach to solving it. They make clear that the answers are not to be found by probing the cognitive, dyadic relation between people’s “awareness” and the facts of language (i.e., it is clear that the differential suprasegmental awareness in these two communities does not concern differential cognitive capacities), but rather through an examination of different semiotically mediated relations between people. That is, the “limits” at issue arise from the possibilities of mutual attention and focus within social interaction, possibilities that always implicate not just the features of some linguistic form, but the system-relative availability of semiotic resources for *thematizing* that form.<sup>3</sup> These limits are thus not fixed. They can be overcome when ways of thematizing a form are conventionalized in a semiotic system, as in the case of the contrast between “heavy/light,” which seems to buoy talk about suprasegmentals, or as also happens when the term “voiced,” as a property of phonological segments, is conventionalized among phoneticians, allowing them to speak freely about the abstract feature of voicing.

Of course, constraints on thematization may be partly caused by constraints on native speakers’ cognitive access, but, as Silverstein shows at key points in his paper, “awareness” is not the key issue. The central issue is thematizability.

The word *thematize* has many meanings. To minimize ambiguity or misunderstanding let us be clear about how we mean it in this paper. If someone thematizes something, they bring that thing into joint focus of attention with an addressee, for some purpose.<sup>4</sup> Subsequent communication can then be *about* that thing (compare Kockelman, 2007, 383; as well as Jakobson 1960’s use of set [*einstellung*]). We find it essential to distinguish two kinds of thematization—one *presentational* and the other *referential*. This distinction clarifies many of the puzzles that discussions of “awareness” raise. It helps us see, for example, why people in the NNT protected area seem to be able to talk about their languages’ suprasegmentals with relative ease, and why, contrastively, many speakers of Lao from elsewhere in the country can make jokes and puns that turn on lexical tone minimal pairs while simultaneously having few ready at hand ways to refer explicitly to the tones that make those jokes work.

## ‘Local limits of thematization’

LoA targets a foundational problem in linguistic anthropology. A defining property of language is its reflexivity (Agha, 2007; Bateson, 1972; Grice, 1957; Hockett and Hockett, 1960; Mead, 1934; Silverstein, 1993; Taylor, 2000). We can use it to refer to itself. But not every feature of language is equally accessible to being talked about or oriented toward (Boas, 1889; Sapir, 1949; Silverstein, 1981; Whorf, 2007).<sup>5</sup> While people can easily gloss nouns like *ee/* or *crossbow*, they struggle to describe other aspects of linguistic practice that they nevertheless control, such as vocal articulation, case-marking, or addressee-sensitive variation in prosody (Hoenigswald, 1985, 23–24). The elements of language that are articulated and ideologized are often the elements that people can, all other things being equal, most readily talk about and coordinate around. This bias not only operates in public discourse, it also influences how scholars study and conceive of language and social life (see Errington 1985, 294; Woolard, 2008). Ideologies of language do not need to be even moderately ‘accurate’ or ‘complete’ to motivate disastrous national policies or utopian dreams (see Gal and Irvine, 2019; Kroskrity, 2000; Schieffelin, Woolard, and Kroskrity, 1998). Indeed, simplicity and partiality can help them spread.

## THE NAKAI-NAM THEUN WATERSHED LANGUAGE SITUATION

As we mentioned above, our intervention into this classic line of research emerged from thinking through the contrast between ‘heavy’ and ‘light’ sounds, which is ubiquitous in the NNT Watershed in the NT2 National Protected Area in central Laos, part of a hydropower “megadam” project area (see Enfield, 2018; Enfield and Diffloth, 2009; Shoemaker and Robichaud, 2018; Zuckerman and Enfield, 2020) Figure 1.

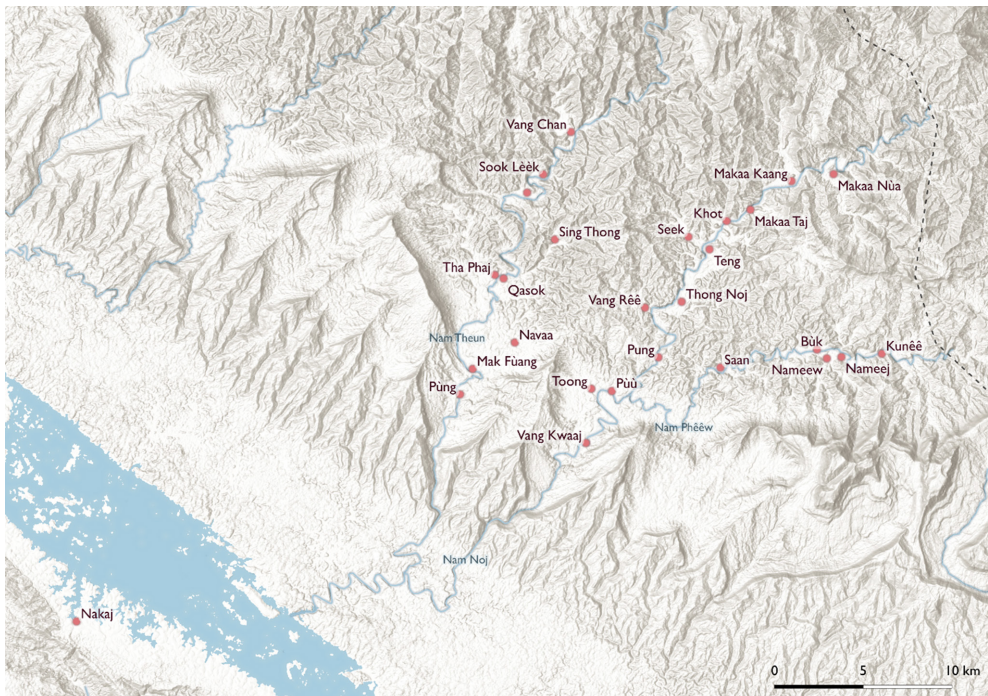


FIGURE 1 The Nakai-Nam Theun Watershed.<sup>6</sup>

Residents of the area speak one or more of the following five languages:

- Kri (Vietic/Austroasiatic. Two dialects: Kri Mrkaa and Kri Phòongq)
- Saek (Northern Tai)
- Bru (Katuic/Austroasiatic)
- Lao (Southwestern Tai)
- Vietnamese (Vietic/Austroasiatic)

The languages are all, generally speaking, mutually unintelligible, but each shares cognates and syntactic patterns with the others, a fact that speakers sometimes discuss. Each language also has a suprasegmental component to its phonology. Suprasegmentals are phonological elements observed above the level of “segments”—i.e., the consonants and vowels that are strung together to form syllables (Ladefoged and Johnson, 2010, 23). The suprasegmentals we discuss here—as instances of lexically-contrastive pitch and phonation—are organized at the syllable level. Saek, Lao, and Vietnamese have systems that are familiarly described as lexical tone. Bru has a two-way distinction in contrastive phonation type, called *register* in the linguistics of Southeast Asian languages (following Henderson, 1952). The Mrkaa dialect of Kri combines a two-way phonation-type distinction and a three-way terminance distinction (see Enfield and Diffloth, 2009), and the Phòongq dialect of Kri has a similar system but appears to be undergoing tonogenesis, whereby pitch contours are beginning to phonologize (see Enfield, 2021, 183–95). NNT Watershed villagers can speak and understand each other’s languages to varying degrees. Most can converse in at least two of them.

Across these languages, speakers share some routines of communication and associated ideologies about language.<sup>7</sup> Throughout the NNT Watershed, for example, many people (especially men) take pride in knowing several languages. They talk about these languages’ structures frequently, and by doing so, display a kind of knowing cosmopolitanism. The local prestige of multilingualism means, among other things, that our field investigations into linguistic form often dovetail with local interest in discussing and acquiring languages.

The contrast between *heavy* and *light* sounds in the NNT Watershed is one key local resource for discussing language. It is one of the most frequently mentioned cross-linguistic, language-ideological axes of differentiation (Gal and Irvine, 2019).<sup>8</sup> We often used it in our field conversations about suprasegmentals, and found that when we intentionally held back from doing so, our consultants would—when presented with minimal pairs that contrasted suprasegmentally and asked about their form—almost without exception raise it themselves (Labov in Hoenigswald, 1985, 24).

## DIMENSIONS AFFECTING “LIMITS OF AWARENESS”

LoA focuses on differences in native speaker testimony in relation to pragmatic aspects of language. Our focus on discussions of phonological features, or the “second articulation” of language (see Martinet, 1964, 24–25), may thus seem to be an awkward match. Some of Silverstein’s dimensions (e.g., metapragmatic transparency) seem not directly relevant to some of our empirical examples—e.g., our examples where lexical tone is being described as functioning to distinguish one segmental form from another.<sup>9</sup> But we suggest that this slight mismatch has little bearing on the nature of our theoretical intervention here, and, furthermore, that our argument applies equally to his. This is because, as commonly understood, meta-pragmatics and discussion of phonology both raise the same fundamental question of the capacity of signs to thematize other signs and their functioning. Beyond this, Silverstein subsequently wrote of “pragmatics” broadly enough that our data, and the more



general “second articulation” of language—with its functioning by way of sequential organization (and thereby co-textual indexicality)—would have to be understood as at least partly “pragmatic.”<sup>10</sup>

On our reading of LoA, suprasegmental features such as lexical tone would be predictably difficult for lay speakers to attend to (Mendoza-Denton, 2011; but see Wong, 2021). To differing degrees, they fail to meet Silverstein’s three formal and functional dimensions that influence “whether or not a native can give evidence of accurate metapragmatic awareness” (1981, 10): unavoidable referentiality, relative presupposition, and continuous segmentability.<sup>11</sup> We summarize these dimensions here.

*Unavoidable referentiality* is “the property of those pragmatic (effective context-dependent) signals that are automatically identified by identifying the elements of speech that refer, or describe” (1981, 5). That is, a pragmatic form is unavoidably referential if, in identifying and isolating that form, one also isolates a form that refers. Thus, in Silverstein’s example, the elements of T/V systems are unavoidably referential because when we identify instances of them as pragmatic forms—e.g., *vous*—we also identify forms that refer. By contrast, Labov’s [r], as pronounced by a Saks shop attendant directing someone to the *fourth floor* (Labov, 1997), is not unavoidably referential. When we isolate the [r] we have not thereby also isolated a form that refers. In this respect, suprasegmental systems are more like [r] than T/V forms: that is, they are not unavoidably referential, even as they function to build units that are.<sup>12</sup>

*Relative presupposition* is a link between a linguistic form and an “independently verifiable contextual factor or factors” (Silverstein, 1981, 6–7). The deictics *this* and *that*, for example, presuppose some identifiable element in the context (whether in previous discourse, the physical environment, or a narrated event). In contrast, a patently ‘pragmatic’ index such as Labov’s department store [r] is relatively *creative* (i.e., non-presuppositional) in that it communicates and establishes “membership in a certain dialect group of American English” (1981, 7). The suprasegmental forms we discuss would thus generally fail to meet this criterion of relatively presuppositional, even if they are only, at times, relatively creative in the classically ‘pragmatic’ sense.

*Continuous segmentability* is “the property of those pragmatic signals that can be identified as continuous stretches of actual speech, segmentable as overt meaningful units of the utterances in which they occur” (Silverstein, 1981). Silverstein gives the example of “The man was walking” and notes that “was” and “walking” are continuously segmentable in his sense but the present continuous “was -ing” is not. Suprasegmental forms like those we discuss also often fail to meet this criterion as well (although they sometimes do meet it).<sup>13</sup> In lexical tone systems, for instance, the various distinctive sonic elements that are attributed to ‘the tone’ may be realized in different parts of a syllable. A number of the tones of Northern Vietnamese are realized discontinuously by a combination of pitch contour, phonation type, and glottal constriction. In the Northern Vietnamese Tone 4 (or B2), usually referred to—interestingly—as *nặng*, falling pitch contour on the vowel nucleus and a syllable-final glottal stop are both defining features of the tone but they appear in different parts of the syllable (Brunelle, 2009; Kirby, 2010; Nguyen, 2019; Thompson, 1987, 41). There are many such examples in tone systems in mainland Southeast Asia, which combine features of pitch, phonation, and glottalic closure, often separated from each other in sequence (Enfield, 2021, chap. 4; Henderson, 1967). Beyond the fact that suprasegmentals are at times non-continuous, temporal continuity is just one condition under which it becomes impossible to present the linguistic element without extraneous matter also being present. This is a crucial point that we discuss in more detail below.

Together, these dimensions of suprasegmentals—that they are not unavoidably referential, not relatively presupposing, and at times non-continuously segmentable—suggest suprasegmentals would be less accessible for native speakers, that is, that they would be

beyond their limits of awareness.<sup>14</sup> And, as we show below, in much of Laos (and Thailand), LoA seems to be predictive. There is no easy way to refer to tones among most people in the area, and, contrary to what many SAE speakers in Euro-American countries might assume, most people in Laos do not have an abstract category for describing suprasegmentals beyond a rather clunky orthographic vocabulary. Questions about how many tones the language has or which tone a word has, for example, are both difficult to ask and mostly left unasked.

But as we show in our research on these features in the NNT Watershed, these hindrances to metapragmatic discourse about suprasegmentals are limiting but not preclusive. In the NNT watershed, people seem to have overcome them, as they often use a distinction between 'heavy' and 'light' sounds that targets exactly these features across several languages.<sup>15</sup> That they do this, furthermore, is consequential, as it seems to make speakers' subsequent thematizations of the same general linguistic forms easier to produce and understand.

## TWO KINDS OF THEMATIZATION

In our framing, the capacity to thematize—i.e., forge joint attention upon—some stretch of object-language using meta-language is a relative function of the attention-directing resources within linguistic and semiotic systems. It derives from the local semiotic environment and the routines of mutual orientation and acts of referring with which semiotic agents *qua* thematizers are familiar. Within this framing—that is, with a focus on the limits of thematization rather than the “limits of awareness”—the core questions become how joint attention on a given object-language is secured and what different kinds of object- and meta-language afford for these processes.

Our goal in this paper is to create a conceptual space in which to ask these questions. To do this, we distinguish between *presentational* and *referential* thematizations.<sup>16</sup> We think this distinction is illuminating for several reasons. It helps us articulate the relation between the relative isolability of a linguistic form and its thematizability. It helps us explain how conventionalized ways of referring to language can allow people to thematize otherwise difficult to isolate forms. And it helps us show how these two kinds of thematization often work together to allow people to orient to language in situated interactions.

### Presentational Thematizations

Say the word *exquisite* aloud, either to yourself or to someone nearby. Focus on emphasizing the final alveolar stop. Bring that sound into focus by way of your pronunciation. You have just *presentationally thematized* the form. All semiotic acts require the production of sign-vehicles, but in presentational thematizations, the form of that sign-vehicle becomes the point. It draws attention. Presentational thematizations like this are poetic in Jakobson's (1960) sense<sup>17</sup> and depictive in Clark's (2016) sense. Through ostension, they exhibit their sign vehicle's own palpability and offer it for intersubjective inspection. They occur constantly in repair sequences (e.g., those in Dingemanse and Enfield, 2015), represented discourse (e.g., Zuckerman, 2021a), and language-teaching (e.g., demonstrating pronunciation or teaching new words).

Presentational thematizations are often part of larger semiotic displays, which themselves are part of larger interactional moments. When we communicate, not everything is intended to convey information, even though it can (e.g., the direction of our eye gaze). So, to make such things meaningful (or non-naturally so, see Grice, 1957), we rely on metapragmatic signs, diacritics of a sort (see Enfield, 2009, 15–17 on “triggers and heuristics for sign

filtration”). Think, for example, of the use of lip protrusion to ‘switch on’ the pointing function of gaze or the use of gestural ‘beats’ or head nods that emphasize a rhythm or particular dimension of a broad linguistic signal.<sup>18</sup>

Let us see how this works in practice.

Zuckerman and Weijian Meng, a collaborator, were eliciting forms in Gedney's 1993 Saek dictionary from a Saek speaker in Teng village named BuaLaj. Our procedure was to read the forms from the dictionary following Gedney's transliteration and then check with BuaLaj (using Lao) that the forms were correct in the local Saek. BuaLaj then produced the forms for the microphone.

In one case (Figure 2), BuaLaj was producing the Saek form for ‘healthier’/ ‘nicer,’ *sambaaj1 kwaa6*. Zuckerman asked him (in Lao) to repeat the form twice. His three utterances in response are ‘careful speech’, produced at twice the duration as the same form in an example sentence (.4 seconds) recorded soon afterwards. In the third repetition, BuaLaj produces the form in an *even* more exaggerated fashion (Figure 3), stretching the low falling tonal contour out and foregrounding the glottalization at its conclusion.

The third iteration made the form's suprasegmental shape palpable in an obvious way. The exaggerated pronunciation had a signal-internal diacritic meaning something like: “pay attention now to the form rather than the content.” While the first two tokens also offered the sound shape of the two-word phrase—as required for the sound recording—the third token more conspicuously presented the phonetic details of pitch for inspection, as an object of consideration for us researchers. Not only is the third token the loudest, it is almost 50 per cent longer than the others: 1.3 seconds against the ~.9 seconds of the other two (and against the .4 seconds of the phrase in running speech). In the third token, BuaLaj stretches out the form, so to speak, offering us a more granular view of its sonorous components.<sup>19</sup>

This presentational thematization of *sambaaj1 kwaa6*—similar, perhaps, to your uttering of “exquisite” a few paragraphs ago—was achieved partly through signal-internal diacritics, which made the thematized sonic form pop. Like many such presentations, it also relied on metapragmatic signs outside of the signal. These also helped indexically focus in on and point toward the focal object-language (that is, the forms' suprasegmentals). In each



FIGURE 2 BuaLaj repeats *sambaaj1 kwaa6*.

<b>RUNNING SPEECH</b>	----
<b>1ST PRESENTATION</b>	-----
<b>2ND PRESENTATION</b>	-----
<b>3RD PRESENTATION</b>	-----

FIGURE 3 Durations of *sambaaɟ1 kwaa6* (each hyphen represents 0.1 s).



FIGURE 4 BuaLaj's leans into the sound of *sambaaɟ1 kwaa6*.

of BuaLaj's three carefully articulated tokens of *sambaaɟ1 kwaa6*, for instance, he bobbed his head downward and held it for a moment, paralleling the falling contour of *kwaa6*. In the third, most presentational of these forms, he bobs his head lower than the other times and holds the bob for longer (see Figure 4). The head-bob involved BuaLaj directly gazing at Zuckerman and crooning his neck down. The effect was not unlike that of a guitarist leaning into a long bended note, emphasizing its dynamic pitch. The move underlined the phonetic exaggeration of the utterance, functioning poetically across communicative modalities to stage the presentation as such.

The legibility of this utterance as a presentational thematization—rather than just an odd repetition—was also, of course, encouraged by Zuckerman's immediate and cotextually available prompt to “repeat that” and the more general pedagogical frame of the entire interaction—namely, that we researchers were learning Saek and recording it. This frame is evident in how consultants reacted to moments where speakers—including the authors—made language palpable (see Csibra and Gergely, 2009). When we tried to produce linguistic forms correctly, our consultants often responded with evaluations: yes, no, or further repetitions. In these cases, the thematizations were interpreted—by way of second-pair-parts—as *such*, that is, as demonstrations and presentations that expert speakers could attend to and evaluate.<sup>20</sup> The thematizations were thus not just invoking joint attention, but also action-constructive, projecting responses of specific kinds.



In addition to thematizing by way of (paradigmatic) exaggeration, we found that speakers often thematized suprasegmental or segmental contrasts by way of poetic juxtaposition.<sup>21</sup> These juxtapositions also relied on supportive metapragmatic work or diacritics. Here are some examples of BuaLaj correcting our pronunciations of Saek, on the one hand, and signaling phonetic and phonological differences between Lao and Saek, on the other.

- a. *plaa1 thlèè5 daj1 bo-mèèn1 plaa1 thrèè5 daj1*  
 “It’s *plaa1 thlèè5* not *plaa1 thrèè5*”
- b. *plaa1 bò-mèèn1 paa1*  
 “[It’s] *plaa1* not *paa1*”
- c. *bò-mèèn1 daj4 [kaa] daj4 kaa3*  
 “It’s not *kaa* (rising) its *kaa3* (falling).”

BuaLaj sometimes made these juxtapositions to repair how we pronounced a form with a parallel correct pronunciation (in the examples above, he does this by reproducing our “incorrect” forms, but he also frequently just offered the correct form). Sometimes this technique helped him thematize segments of forms with more granularity. For example:

- d. *kak4kèè5 bò-mèèn1 daj4 kak4kèè kak4kèè lèq1 mèèn1 phaasaa3 laaw2 kak4 qeem*  
 “*kak4kèè5* it’s not *kapkèè*. *Kapkèè* is Lao. *kak4* [is Saek], yes.”

At the end of this utterance, BuaLaj repeats *kak4*, the distinctive first syllable of the Saek word for ‘gecko.’ This underlines the formal linguistic element already highlighted by the juxtaposition: the difference in the final of the initial syllable, Saek’s velar stop versus Lao’s bilabial.

Of course, this construal does not merely involve the linguistic forms in an iconic and indexical poetic juxtaposition. It is also achieved by way of the predicative forms in a NEG-Copula construction, *bò-mèèn5*, that you can see used in examples *a-d*. Speakers morpho-syntactically embed their presentational thematizations into constructions such as these. They use them to help thematize the object-language being presented and to further characterize it as, for instance, ‘Lao’ or ‘incorrect.’

We will turn to these referential constructions in the following section. First, however, we emphasize that presentational thematizations require a degree of isolability for the purpose of presentation. Here we distinguish three features that inhibit speakers’ capacities to isolate an object-language such that they can then demonstrate it and make it palpable for others to attend to. Together these features imply that—all other things being equal (which, of course, they never are)—it is easier to thematize some form presentationally (and, in turn and consequently, it is also easier to thematize that form referentially as we discuss below), when that form can be produced with the least amount of irrelevant accompanying information.

## Non-continuous segmentability

The first dimension that inhibits isolability was, as we discussed above, identified by Silverstein: ‘non-continuous segmentability.’ To presentationally thematize the ‘past continuous’ morphological construction in English, as in ‘was walk-ing’, one would need either to omit the extraneous matter (“walk”) that intervenes (e.g., saying ‘was ing’) in a way that collapses the morphosyntactic and temporal structure of the linguistic form in use, or include the intervening incidental form (“walk”, in this case). Omission or inclusion of intervening

materials makes isolation harder to achieve. But, of course, both strategies might work—one could, for instance, include the intervening forms but pinpoint the form at issue by repeating multiple renditions with different base forms (e.g., ‘was walking’, ‘was buying’, ‘was eating’)—such juxtaposition pinpoints what is shared.<sup>22</sup>

## Non-morphological status

A second dimension that inhibits isolability is whether the target structure is a morphological unit that can occur syntactically on its own, e.g., functioning as a noun phrase, in a larger denotational structure (e.g., like the NEG-Copula structure mentioned above). It sounds odd (but not impossible) to say, ‘He can’t say sss correctly,’ because sss is not a free morpheme in English.<sup>23</sup> The problem is magnified given the difficulty of indexing not just one phonological segment that is used to compose words—as BuaLaj did in his making palpable the final of the first syllable of gecko above (*kak4*)—but a single (and abstracted) element of a segmental and suprasegmental composite: e.g., the lexical tone of a word.

This dimension makes clear that whether a form can be isolated is not just a question of sound shape, but also concerns how that given form fits into the semiotic system in which it is used.<sup>24</sup> That is, the capacity to thematize is sensitive to *categories* of form. Think of hierarchies between allophonic/phonemic relations, on the one hand, and forms in running speech versus citation forms, such as infinitives of verbs in English, e.g. ‘to be,’ ‘to run’, on the other. Reflecting on the former in the “Psychological Reality of Phonemes,” Sapir concluded that what differentiated psychologically salient forms from non-salient forms was their system-relative value, i.e., whether they were phonemes (Osgood et al., 1954). Gudschinsky (1958) found similar hierarchies in the salience of tone in Mazatec, as consultants were less able to categorize and discuss the phonetic realization of tone in tone sandhi than they were able to comment on tones in non-sandhi contexts.

## Sonic dependence

This relates to a third dimension: the sonic dependence of a form, or whether it can occur phonetically independently or must be expressed through a ‘vehicle.’<sup>25</sup> In her discussion of ‘creaky voice,’ Mendoza-Denton (2011) describes a variety of ‘semiotic hitchhiker’ forms that have ‘no vehicles of their own.’

We might say that one way in which extraneous matter may be present in a presentational thematization is by intervening linearly in a discontinuous structure, as “walk” does in “was walking.” But another way in which extraneous matter is introduced when we try to isolate a form is apparent from the familiar bundling of phonological features in a swatch of vocal sound. Say you are being interviewed by a field linguist and you want to convey the way in which “zeal” is not the same as “seal.” The initial “segment”—a bundle of [+voiced +apico-alveolar +fricative]—can readily be segmented as a whole package, as in “It’s [zz], not [ss],” or “It’s [z<sup>ə</sup>], not [s<sup>ə</sup>].” But if one specifically wants to thematize the property of “+voice” (say, to capture that zeal is to seal as veal is to feel and deal is to teal), this property cannot readily be segmented out from the other two values. Indeed, first-year phonetics and phonology class is mostly about countering this case of hypoco-gnition in linguistics majors and providing the sustained training it takes to isolate, attend to, and thematize the non-segmentable, abstract concept of “voicing.” Note that voicing is not experienced as temporally discontinuous (as in (a) above). That is not the problem. The segmentability problem with +voice in /z/ results from a different mechanism that

introduces extraneous matter: namely, the unavoidable formal co-occurrence of multiple independent features in speech sounds.

As we shall see in our discussion of ‘heavy/light’ syllables below, this limit on isolability applies to subsegmental features like +voice in the same way as it applies to suprasegmental features. Despite the fact some lexical tones—as, say, the one that differentiates the words *shī* ‘to lose’ and *shì* ‘to be’ in Mandarin—occur over a continuous stretch of time, the tone is not “segmentable” in the sense relevant here. Just as you can produce a “z” but you cannot produce a “voiced segment” without also producing a segment at some place/manner of articulation, so you can produce a word with “Tone 1” in Mandarin (e.g., *shī* ‘to lose’), but you cannot produce “Tone 1” without also producing some vocalization (or without having a shared vocabulary for such metalinguistic reference).

Vehicle-less forms are difficult to produce and to index. Think of how easy it is to point to an apple and how difficult it is to point to that apple’s bitterness. Historically, linguists and their consultants have overcome this limitation in regard to tone and other suprasegmentals in creative ways. For example, having consultants hum or whistle “can be of great help to the investigator whose ear is slow to pick up pitches” (Pike, 1961, 44; see Gudschinsky, 1958).<sup>26</sup> Such practices allow for suprasegmentals to be isolated; “Consonants and vowels drop out of the system, but other elements of the speech signal can remain, including tone, stress, syllable count, glottal closure, intonation, and rhythmicity” (Sicoli, 2016, 412). This phonetic reduction helps because it isolates its focus, offering a surrogate for what tone lacks: a vehicle of its own. In making tone more isolable, it processes it and aids in thematization. (See also visual representations of the fundamental frequency contours of tones, which presentationally thematize by way of transposing from one modality to another, e.g., Bradley, 1911).

## Referential Thematizations

*Referential thematizations* denote or describe an object-language rather than just produce it. They thematize by way of reference and predication. A linguist who says ‘That voiceless alveolar stop was aspirated’ describes and thereby refers to a swatch of sound that was just produced. As with presentational thematizations, referential thematizations often work in concert with other semiotic resources—gaze, gesture, presentational thematizations, et cetera—which identify and secure construal of a referent. In fact, they often have presentational thematizations as their referents.

Referential thematizations can come in many forms. We propose five parameters for understanding the possibilities, but more, and subtler distinctions, are likely, and we hope that our article opens up comparative discussion and research on these issues. The parameters we offer span characteristics of the object-language (the form that is thematized) and the meta-language. We now list them in turn.

### Presence or absence of the object-language

When some swatch of object-language is referred to, ‘it’ (that is, a token of it) can be relatively present in the immediate interactional environment (e.g., just said or about to be said) or absent, misremembered, predicted, or imagined. Presentational thematizations are so useful in part because they can make an object-language present; whereas referential thematizations are useful insofar as they can be temporally untethered from the production of the focal object-language form they refer to.

## Specificity or genericity of the object-language

The target of a referential thematization can be specific—i.e., a sound that occurred (or was imagined to occur) in some delimited moment(s)—or generic. We use the term “generic” here in a particular sense (see *inter alia* Krifka et al., 1995; Leslie, 2012; Mannheim, 2021; Zuckerman, 2021b; Zuckerman, 2021c). Generics target a linguistic form-kind, apart from any instance of uttering it, as a broad, generic type (cf. Lucy, 1993, 9–10). Speakers can genericize about, among other things, language as a kind of behavior, about a particular language (say, Saek or English), or about elements within a given language, e.g., they can talk about the sound “t” as opposed to some specific realization of that sound in time. Specifics contrastively refer to relatively individuated swatches of experience, to particular realizations of sound: to some instance of language, of “Saek,” or of some particular linguistic form. These specifics can then vary according to (IIa) above (i.e., their referents can be spatio-temporally copresent, or imagined, unreal, et cetera).

## Isomorphism of object-language and meta-language

Some acts of referring to language use the same form for both object-language and meta-language, e.g., “He called him a fox” and “Fox is a word people use to mean someone is clever.” Other acts of referring use different forms: e.g., Pat says, “Fuck” and when Kim reports this later, she says “Pat said the F word.” When speakers use ‘the same’ form for both kinds of thematization in combination, the object-language and meta-language are isomorphic. This has important consequences in terms of how easy it is to thematize a form, as we discuss below.<sup>27</sup>

## Denotational content of the meta-language

All metalinguistic thematizations have, at bottom, uncertainty as to what is being thematized: a tonal contour, a puff of air after a released stop, ‘the word’ as a whole. This is in part because indexicality is fundamentally under-determined (compare Quine, 1969, 1–6)—we can never know exactly what a speaker is ‘pointing toward’—and in part because the boundaries of the ‘object-language’ are never fully specifiable. With that said, the meta-language of referential thematizations can be more or less characterizing, that is, it can have different degrees of denotational content (see Hanks, 1990, 36–43; Kockelman, 2007, Manning, 2001, 65–66; *inter alia*). This content can (alongside co-occurring presentational thematizations) help secure reference, as it can make claims about intentionality and evaluate the object-language by putting it under one description rather than another (Anscombe, 1957; Sidnell, 2017), among other things. Less characterizing forms convey minimal information about the substantive characteristics of the object-sign.<sup>28</sup> Think of a finger-point gesture—almost any kind of thing could serve as its referent (see Agha, 2007, 118).<sup>29</sup> More characterizing forms add semantic detail of various kinds. Think, for instance, of rather open-ended sense carrying noun phrases such as “this one,” as opposed to more denotationally narrowing phrases such as, “this sound,” “this English word,” “this cat,” “this string of phonemes.”

## Conventionalization of the meta-language

Metalinguistic forms can be more or less conventionalized within a semiotic system. Sometimes speakers describe language in a relatively *ad hoc* manner, straining for resources



to thematize some swatch of object language. At other times they use more established metalinguistic routines, themselves a part of linguistic registers of cross-modal norms of communication, such as the ‘heavy/light’ distinction. Between these two poles, mini routines of thematization also emerge within and across interactions. All field linguists have surely experienced how *ad hoc* thematizations of language can become, for the span of an interaction or for a pair of people over several interactions, relatively effervescent or limited conventionalizations, that are both useful and restricted in social domain (Agha, 2007, 64), similar to an inside joke. Such conventionalized metalinguistic routines—once established—can enable thematization of linguistic forms we might expect to lie beyond the usual limits of thematization.<sup>30</sup>

## ‘HEAVY SOUND LIGHT SOUND’: A CONVENTIONAL METALANGUAGE FOR REFERENTIAL THEMATIZATION

We have argued thus far that the three features that inhibit speakers’ capacities to isolate a piece of object-language help explain why suprasegmentals generally may be difficult to thematize. The five parameters along which referential thematizations can vary—described in the last section—help further specify what overcoming these difficulties with referential thematization might look like. We now illustrate our approach by way of the most relied-upon metalinguistic routines for referential thematization in the NNT Watershed: the distinction between ‘heavy’ and ‘light’ sounds. By comparing this contrast to less conventionalized and clumsier metalinguistic routines concerning suprasegmentals elsewhere, especially in the cities and villages of Lowland Laos where the ‘heavy/light’ contrast is not used and where reference to the isolated elements of suprasegmental systems is much less common, we show the difference that a metalinguistic routine can make in people’s capacity to thematize.

In terms of the above parameters, the ‘heavy/light’ distinction is a (Ile) highly conventionalized and (Ild) relatively characterizing meta-linguistic contrast. It is never (Ilc) isomorphic with its object-language, but it is flexible insofar as that it can be used to refer (Ilb) generically and specifically and to (IIa) spatiotemporally proximate and distal forms.<sup>31</sup>

The ‘heavy/light’ contrast is cross-linguistic, insofar as speakers of all the languages in the NNT Watershed use an analog of it:

Language	Phrase
Kri	<i>siàng nnangq siàng singeelq</i>
Bru	<i>siang ntâng siang ngkheel</i>
Saek	<i>siang2 nak4 siang2 vaw1</i>
Lao	<i>siang3 nak2 siang3 baw3</i>
Translation	sound heavy sound light

We found that uses of the phrase in referential thematization during participant observation, casual face-to-face interactions, and elicitation sessions can be divided into two broad kinds, distinguished by the different linguistic traits speakers thematize: system-internal lexical contrasts and inter-varietal contrasts. So too is the ‘heavy/light’ distinction both a ready at hand resource for describing specific sounds and a tool for ‘differentiation’ (Gal and Irvine, 2019), which is ideologically tied to, and used to predicate about, named varieties in generic discourse.

System-internally, the phrase can be used to distinguish two words in a language that differ in terms of a suprasegmental feature such as phonation type or pitch contour. People often refer to two contrasting words together as ‘heavy/light’, without specifying which is

heavy and which is light. At other times, they clarify which is which. In these moments, ‘heavy’ tends to capture phonetic elements including breathiness (vs. clear phonation), syllable-final glottal stop (vs. no stop), and falling pitch (vs. other pitch contours). ‘Heaviness’ and ‘lightness’ are also sometimes graded (Carruthers, 2017; Kockelman, 2022), as sounds are characterized as ‘heavy’ and ‘heavier,’ or ‘light’ and ‘truly light.’

Speakers also use the phrase to characterize the systems of whole varieties generically, much as one might say that this language is ‘tonal’ and that language is not. Pan, a Kri man in middle Mrkaa, described how some people would incorrectly say a ‘light’ Kri form in a ‘heavy’ way. He said: “There are heavy and light sounds, it’s...it’s the nature of [the language].” When we asked a Saek man, Lung Dòò, if some individuals spoke “heavier” than others, he said, “No, there are always heavy and light [words].” Baaj, a Kri man living in a Saek village, likewise said: “There is no language that doesn’t have heavy and light sounds—they all have them.”

In inter-varietal uses, NNT Watershed villagers use ‘heavy/light’ to compare two dialects or languages. Sometimes they do this generically as well. For example, the Mrkaa variety of Kri was invariably described as ‘heavy’, and the Kri Phòòngq variety as ‘light’.

At other times, speakers use the contrast to characterize cognate forms across two varieties, e.g., the word for ‘eat’ in Saek and Lao (which are segmentally more or less identical) or ‘swidden’ in Kri Mrkaa and Kri Phòòngq. Here is the latter contrast:

Kri Mrkaa = [t̚ɹ̥aːh] (falling pitch).

Kri Phòòngq = [t̚ɹ̥h̥aː] (level pitch).

The ‘heavy’ Kri Mrkaa version has an unaspirated initial, devoiced terminance, and falling pitch; the ‘light’ Kri Phòòngq version has an aspirated initial, modal terminance, and level pitch.

Sometimes, people whom we prompted to cite examples of ‘heavy/light’ words in two varieties responded that they only knew that the two forms would contrast as ‘heavy/light’ and were reluctant to perform the contrast. Speakers also sometimes disagreed about the applicability of the ‘heavy/light’ contrast across the same cognate phrases. For example, six L1 Kri Mrkaa speakers who discussed the phrase “where are you going,” said that the forms contrasted in the Mrkaa and Phòòngq varieties—one being ‘heavy,’ the other ‘light.’ A seventh L1 Kri Phòòngq speaker and long-term Kri Mrkaa village resident said that the two forms were “the same.”

## An abstract metalinguistic distinction

In contrast to what we have found among L1 speakers of Lao in Vientiane, Luang Prabang, and Nakai (just outside the NNT Watershed), many in the NNT Watershed talk about suprasegmental lexical contrasts with ease. Clearly their ‘heavy’ and ‘light’ distinction is not an analytically consistent, crisp conception of suprasegmentals or associated syllabic features. As a technical theorization of the phonological structure of these languages goes, it is relatively vague (see Dixon, 1992). It offers no mechanism, for instance, for identifying particular tones or kinds of phonation—no analog to the orderly, numbered or diacritic tone-marking of the Romanized *Hanyu Pinyin* used for specifying tones of Mandarin Chinese words.

But the vagueness of the distinction is a feature. It correlates with its flexibility, as speakers use it to talk about contrasts from two distinct words to the diverse phonological features of the NNT Watershed’s languages. This generality turns out to reflect a certain unity of these languages’ systems at a higher level. Whereas ‘tone’ and phonation ‘register’ systems were once treated as quite distinct, they are now well understood to be realizations of the single phenomenon of laryngeally-based lexical contrast, including where the laryngeal features in

question are discontinuously distributed through the syllable (Brunelle and Kirby, 2015, 202; Brunelle and Kirby, 2016; Zuckerman and Enfield, 2020).<sup>32</sup>

Silverstein's LoA model predicts that the suprasegmental qualities captured by the 'heavy/light' distinction are closer to the limits of awareness and should thus be difficult to talk about. Indeed, this conforms with what we observe elsewhere in Laos: most L1 Lao speakers have highly limited capacity to referentially thematize distinctions of tone in their language, despite its central importance in the sound system. But the NNT Watershed situation appears to run counter to this: the fact that the 'heavy' and 'light' phrase exists, and the relative ease with which speakers use it to target an otherwise elusive property of language, would seem surprising.

Perhaps the benchmark for something like full tonal/register awareness is the capacity to list and perform the phonemic categories of tones or registers in one's language, and thereby answer the intuitive to many Euro-Americans but often locally incomprehensible question of 'how many tones' a language has. There is no way to ask this question in Lao, nor could lay people answer it. Notice that this benchmark requires the capacity to thematize in both presentational and referential ways, to (1) genericize about a language, (2) produce instances of distinct 'tones' for auditory inspection, and (3) characterize them as distinct kinds. Research in mainland Southeast Asia finds that few people untrained in linguistics can do all three of these things (see Bradley, 1911, 283; Gedney, 1972, 194; List, 1961; 26–27).

Beyond the task of simply counting or labeling categories, speakers of tonal and phonation register languages in the region also often struggle to distinguish segmental shape and suprasegmentals more generally, lacking ways to thematize the relation between segments that share a tone/register or to compare near-identical segments that differ only in tone/register. Gedney (1972, 19) offered this advice to fieldworkers on Tai languages: "Some informants can tell which syllables, of different segmental shape, have the same tone, or can be trained to do so, but most cannot, and often the informants who are in other respects most productive and helpful are quite blind in this respect, and are often so puzzled and distressed if one asks about this point that in general it is better never to ask; those who are able to give help will sense the problem and volunteer the information."<sup>33</sup>

This is unsurprising and as LoA would predict. Cross-linguistically, people are not adept at explicitly describing suprasegmental systems such as tone, stress, and phonation, compared with segmentals.<sup>34</sup> Nor are linguists exempt. Think of the marginal place of tone and stress in discussions of linguistics, and the marginal quality of resources for marking them in the International Phonetic Alphabet.<sup>35</sup> This is partly because the standardized European languages through which disciplinary linguistics was developed rarely use suprasegmentals for lexical contrast. And it is partly because of the nature of suprasegmentals: they are harder to isolate, following the features outlined above (1a-c), and more resistant to segmentation for alphabetic writing (Osgood et al., 1954, 12). Orthographies that mark all phonemic tones are often difficult to learn (Bird, 1999) and have been said to require abstract tonal awareness which can be difficult to inculcate or teach (see Vibulpatanavong and Evans, 2019). For speakers of the Grassfield Bantu language, Dschang, in Cameroon, for example, such "[t]onal awareness [was] taught using whole-body exercises, standing and crouching to mimic voice pitch" (Bird, 1999, 4).

## Thematizing suprasegmentals outside of the NNT Watershed

Yet while many people are incapable of referentially thematizing lexical suprasegmentals, they have no trouble using or recognizing suprasegmentals during conversation (see e.g., Abramson, 1975; Brunelle, 2009). In mainland Southeast Asia, in fact, tonal systems are perhaps "the most useful criterion for dialect boundaries within the Tai-speaking area"

(Gedney, 1989, 191), and people are attuned to this. In the 19th century, Adolf Bastian (1867, 75) noted that “The Siamese never lose an opportunity for a laugh at the people of Ligor (Nakhon Srithammarat or Myang Lakhon), who speak the Siamese language with an even delivery, without regard to the tonic accents.” As Smalley (1994, 108) writes, “Tones are salient throughout Thailand for distinguishing between ‘us’ and ‘them.’” That one tone can sound like another is, for example, at the heart of the ribald joke-song in the movie *แพมปอนด์ 3*, in which the line “[We] older brothers came as four people,” becomes, “[We] older brothers came to fuck people” (the words meaning “four” and “to fuck” are a minimal pair differing only in tone; see Figure 5 for a still image from the film).

We have likewise heard many examples where suprasegmental contrasts between dialects of Lao figure in comments or jokes, where speakers offer examples of what ‘people from Luang Prabang’ or ‘people from Pakse,’ for example, sound like (compare Pike, 1945; Pike, 1946). These suprasegmental contrasts tend to be thematized presentationally, with referential thematizations limited to those that are (Ie) non-conventional or (Id) minimally characterizing. That is, conversations around suprasegmental differences usually center on presentational thematizations by way of example, which juxtapose two segmentally similar forms with different suprasegmentals (and thereby overcome the hurdles in the way of isolability). People thus readily present suprasegmental contrasts in jokes, but rarely unpack them and describe their parts. These presentational juxtapositions are themselves conventionalized, as they rely on relatively predictable pairings (e.g., *paj3 saj3*, ‘where are you going’) and shibboleths for specifying what, exactly, is being presented: a suprasegmental difference.

While presentational thematizations are the most common way L1 Lao speakers outside the NNT Watershed thematize suprasegmentals, these speakers do sometimes thematize referentially. We have heard many times, for example, about how people in Luang Prabang speak ‘enjoyably’ (*muan1*) and people in Pakse speak ‘strong’ (*hèeng2*). So too do L1 Lao speakers often talk about lexical tonal distinctions by relying on the somewhat clumsy vocabulary provided by the orthography of Lao. We turn to this issue now.



FIGURE 5 Characters in a Thai comedy sing an unintentionally vulgar song because of a tone pun. (Screenshot from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PnrPxyZ0zRc>).



## Lao orthography: another conventional metalanguage for referential thematization

Orthographies are metalinguistic resources designed for coding the sounds of language (see Kuo and Anderson, 2008), and so it is no surprise that people rely on orthography for the referential thematization of speech sounds. These technical cultural creations are loaded with ideologies of how language works and should work (see, e.g., Choksi, 2021). Explicit metalinguistic comments about the spoken forms of language are often sieved through them (Auer, Barden, and Grosskopf, 1998, 165; Bloomfield, 1944, 49; Choksi and Meek, 2016, 249; Harkness, 2012, 375–376; pace Sapir, 1949, 54). Think of when an English speaker states that English has five vowels—a, e, i, o, and u—when in fact the language has around twelve distinct pure vowel phonemes and eight diphthongs, depending on the dialect. Discourses about linguistic varieties and the people that speak them often use named letters in alphabetic systems to orient their semiotic ideologies: when Bugis migrants realize Malay alveolar nasal finals with velar nasal finals, e.g., *makan* → *makang*, they are said to have “excess vitamin G” (Carruthers, 2019, 485); Cambridge, Massachusetts locals are said to “drop their Rs” in words like *park*, *car*, and *Harvard Yard*. In Laos and Thailand, the letter [r]/ròð became an emblem in discourse around political identity in twentieth-century state attempts to reform the languages and their associations with opposing regimes (Davis, 2015; Diller, 2002; Enfield, 1999).

Standard Lao has five tones (Enfield, 2007). Lao orthography, like Thai, encodes tone unambiguously but in an opaque and complex way (unlike Pinyin, as we mention above).<sup>36</sup> Only two dedicated tone markers (called *maj4 qêék5* and *maj4 thoo2*) are normally used in Lao. One of them is unambiguous (always marking tone 1), while the other signals different tones depending on what co-occurs with it, with reference to (i) the class of the consonants at the beginning of the syllable (consonants are grouped into classes, which gives them “partial tone marking functions” (Diller, 2017, 229)), (ii) presence or absence of a syllable-final plosive, and (iii) length of the vowel (short vs. long). These complexities are explained with reference to the history of the language (Enfield, 2007, 35–38) but need not be understood by users of the language (just as English speakers do not need to know why *l* and *eye* are written differently but pronounced the same).

The result is an accurate system for encoding tone that literate people learn to use without learning how it works. Literate Lao speakers can write words correctly such that the tone is clear, but they are usually unable to isolate or discuss ‘tone’ in the abstract. Why is Lao orthography cumbersome for referentially thematizing ‘tone’ or ‘tones’? Because that is not the problem it is designed to solve. It is designed to encode lexemes in a decodable way. It is not designed for orienting to difficult-to-segment elements of phonological form. That said, as a conventionalized system for representing tone, it remains available as a (somewhat clunky) metalinguistic resource for literate Lao speakers to gesture toward this elusive dimension of language.

By contrast, in the NNT Watershed, the ‘heavy/light’ contrast offers a ready way to thematize suprasegmental differences, bringing them to mutual attention. Watershed residents do occasionally relate the ‘heavy/light’ distinction to Lao tone markers, but in a way that is revealingly different from what happens elsewhere in Laos. NNT residents familiar with written Lao describe the Lao orthography through the ‘heavy/light’ lens: in standard Lao, the diacritic *maj4 qêék5* is always Tone 1 (level) and *maj4 thoo2* marks both high-falling Tone 4 and low-falling Tone 5 (both falling); as we would predict, NNT villagers who mention the tone markers agreed that *maj4 thoo2* is ‘heavy’ and *maj4 qêék5* is ‘light.’

Importantly, while the heavy/light contrast is a conventionalized standard routine of metalinguistic conversation in the NNT Watershed, it only elicits confusion outside of the Watershed, where it is reacted to as an ad hoc metaphor. When we conducted Gedney (1972)

tone checklists with two Lao speakers in Nakai town, neither recognized ‘heavy/light’ as forms denoting the sound system. The same is true for many lowlanders we have spoken to about the issue. Lowland Lao speakers generally refer to speech as ‘heavy’ (*nak2*) only in contrast to ‘sweet’ (*vaan3*) speech. This use characterizes affective, pragmatic alternations of speech—differentiations of a type familiar to linguistic anthropologists (Gal and Irvine, 2019)—whereby ‘heavy’ speech is angry speech. This meaning of ‘heavy’ speech is hardly recognized in the NNT Watershed.

To summarize, both in the NNT Watershed and in Lowland Laos, most speakers can thematize suprasegmentals through presentational thematization. But there are striking differences in the capacity to characterize specific instances of suprasegmentals and to genericize about them. In the NNT Watershed, the abstraction of suprasegmental difference is alive and oriented to through referential thematizations. In Lowland Laos this happens occasionally, but in strained and less-routine ways. What accounts for this difference in metalinguistic practice? And why might suprasegmentals appear to be vulnerable in this regard? For answers, we now turn to the power of conventionalization, and its role in overcoming the limits of thematization.

## THE POWER OF CONVENTIONALIZATION

Certain linguistic elements—especially sense-carrying words—come conveniently ready for several metalinguistic processes. They already fit in the machine so to speak, offering an “ease of reportability” (Agha, 2007, 346). For example, you can make the word *cat* palpable by demonstrating it with a marked pronunciation (presentational), and you can mention it specifically or generically with a version of the same form, *cat* (referential), e.g., ‘*cat* means member of the Felidae family.’ These forms are easily isolable in the ways outlined above (la-c; that is, they are continuously segmentable, free morphological units that are sonically independent). But other elements, such as the glottalization component of a ‘tone,’ are not ready to be thematized without first being processed, whether that involves extracting or isolating them from linguistic materials in which they are embedded or referring to them with forms that can occur as syntactic units in acts of reference and predication.

In cases where presentational thematization is difficult, because a person cannot produce the form (or ‘control’ it; see Preston, 1996), or because the form resists isolation or thematization by way of juxtaposition, referential thematizations are more difficult too, as speakers cannot merely produce the form in isolation and then refer to that production. But speakers may nevertheless find a way to *refer to* that linguistic element. This is the utility of referential thematizations. They provide a solution to the problem of isolability. And they become more useful for doing this after a degree of conventionalization.

As we wrote above, some referential thematizations are relatively non-conventional and rely on indexical forms that are *ad hoc*. But other forms use conventionalized symbols that are more readily construed as metalinguistic thematizations of a linguistic object. Such symbols are moorings (Enfield and Zuckerman, *In Press*). And once these moorings are relatively routine and conventionalized, they afford new kinds of semiotic acts.

On the one hand, they allow for reference in the absence of actual linguistic tokens (parameter IIa above). They thus offer the capacity to talk about language without being able to control it, and without having to isolate it in a presentational thematization. This means they can be used whether or not a speaker knows how to produce or even recognize the referred to linguistic form. So, an outsider linguist can ask a consultant to “repeat that word” or “give an example of a heavy sound.” Or Siang Phòong, an L2 Kri speaker who we asked to give us the Kri Phòongq equivalent of a Kri Tàn form, can say that he doesn’t know “except for that it is related to the Kri Tàn form by heaviness and lightness.”

Second, such symbols enhance the capacity to engage in generic reference, to genericize about linguistic categories and language itself and thus to move from talking about some specific linguistic form to talking about that form as a kind (parameter IIb).<sup>37</sup> It is difficult to understand genericizations about kinds that are not well-established (Krifka et al., 1995, 11), but when the referents' of generics cross the threshold into kindness and thus intelligibility, people can characterize particular types of speech in broad swaths: "the Lao 'R' is rarely pronounced," "Vietnamese has six tones." This genericizing can be a mechanism not only for refining explicitly articulated concepts about language, but for spreading broad ideologies and, in the process, performing oneself as a particular kind of person (see Enfield and Zuckerman, *In Press*).

With conventionalization, referential thematizations become moored to semiotic practices, newly untethered from the dock of the phonetic sounds themselves. As such, they can also help frame and specify acts of presentation, of making palpable. That is, much as they can obviate the need to isolate by finding another way, so too can they help isolate. Think of the reflexive, metapragmatic work that people do to clarify the frame around presentational thematizations that we outlined above (e.g., the NEG-Copula construction). References to 'heaviness' can help people see that some particular token or type of suprasegmental sound is the focus of attention. Once a symbol becomes associated with metalinguistic practices, thematizations of all kinds become easier. Lyons (1977, 11) writes:

The metalanguage is in principle a quite different language from the object language: it need not therefore have in its vocabulary any of the actual words or phrases belonging to the object-language. *It is a matter of convenience*, rather than necessity, that the metalanguage-expression 'man' should be related systematically to the English word that it names by enclosing the conventional written citation-form of the word in quotation marks. Any other convention would serve for the purpose of constructing metalanguage-names provided that it was clear which object-language word or phrase was being named by which metalanguage name.... Indeed, if we wished, for our own whimsical purposes, to identify the words and phrases of the object language by christening them with such names as 'Tom', 'Dick' and 'Harry', there is nothing to prevent us from doing so (*emphasis added*).

Pulling apart the two kinds of thematization—presentational and referential—and seeing how they support one another makes clear how important the *convenience* that Lyons identifies is for understanding the local limits of thematization. If conventionalization generally enhances the capacity to thematize language, having the same form for meta-language and object-language (IIc), employing the same unit to refer to and to present a linguistic form, makes thematization, all other things being equal, even easier. Without that isomorphism, people who might want to orient to some stretch of language with others are left to rely on ad hoc routines of isolating that form and referring to it. This is the power of metalinguistic conventionalization—it gives people new discursive tools with which they can work upon their language and overcome the limits of thematization.<sup>38</sup>

## Rethinking conventionalization's role in LoA

In LoA's two extended examples, Silverstein juxtaposes Dixon's findings about 'mother-in-law speech' in Dyirbal with his own experiences studying Wasco-Wishram Chinookan. He compares the relative salience of Dyirbal mother-in-law language and the relative opacity of the Wasco-Wishram Chinookan augmentative-neutral-diminutive cline. He argues that the

differential availability of the two object-languages for “conscious metapragmatic discourse” relates to their formal and functional features.<sup>39</sup> And he uses the examples to support his more general point that “we can best guarantee native speaker awareness for referential, segmental, presupposing functional forms in his language” (Silverstein, 1981, 19).<sup>40</sup>

Silverstein's point here is about properties of *object-languages*, but his examples and some of his remarks also demonstrate a contrast in the conventionalization of *meta-languages*. In the Dyrbal case, there are conventionalized lexical labels (or ethnometapragmatic terms) for the relevant contrasts, which speakers could readily use to thematize the forms referentially: *Dyalñuy* for ‘mother-in-law’ language, and *Guwal* for ‘everyday’ speech. In other words, the Dyrbal language supplied its contemporary speakers with a pre-processed metalanguage, which was crystalized over a history of referential thematization by past users of the language. This pre-processing made *Dyalñuy* and *Guwal* into conventionalized moorings for thematizing the contrast at the time of Dixon's work. His consultants Chloe Grant and George Watson could use them to debate which lexemes belonged in which metapragmatic category. And Dixon himself could, and did, leverage these capacities to clarify the lexical semantics of the two codes: “each Guwal word in turn was put to the informant and he was asked for its Dyalñuy equivalent” (1971, 449).<sup>41</sup>

In the Wasco-Wishram Chinookan case, there was no conventional label available for referring to such forms, no ready-made form in the system for drawing the speaker's attention to the phenomena. Silverstein's consultants also seemed to have difficulty thematizing the three-part contrast presentationally (limited, in part, by the forms' resistance to isolability (la-c), as Silverstein describes). When, for instance, he observed one consultant using the augmentative form in gossip, and then asked her to repeat it, she offered the ‘neutral’ form instead (1981, 9). When another consultant was prompted with the diminutive forms, she said they “‘sounded kinda cute,’ but she just could not grasp the metapragmatic task of producing them on demand, though her spontaneous speech was replete with examples” (1981, 9).<sup>42</sup>

Silverstein (1981, 4, 10) writes that the three factors he identifies in the first part of his paper play a “necessary, though perhaps not sufficient, role in this awareness, this availability...for conscious metapragmatic discussion.” But these factors are not, in fact, necessary for “conscious metapragmatic discussion.” Rather, conventionalized habits of thematizing can overcome them. They have done so in relation to suprasegmentals in the NNT Watershed, as we have shown. And such habits did so in relation to the Wasco-Wishram Chinookan example: Silverstein himself, by way of his own metapragmatic resources as a trained linguist, was able to characterize the system for his readers. Linguists—like lay people—have reasons to thematize particular forms when they do, and in dialog with other linguists and consultants, they learn and evolve conventionalized techniques for doing so.<sup>43</sup> Given a historical reason to thematize these forms, we expect Wasco-Wishram speakers would have developed similar metapragmatic resources.

The point here is that conventionalized habits of thematizing—including the development of metalinguistic labels that can be used to refer—may, in a vacuum, be more likely to appear for some object-languages rather than others (and our discussion of isolability, inspired by Silverstein's dimension of non-continuous segmentability, would predict this). But once such habits and labels are available to language learners—once, in a community of semiotic practice, those forms have crossed a threshold after which they become frequent presentations and referential targets—that availability can aid other thematizations, as a kind of mooring for mutual orientation and recognizable kinds of social action.<sup>44</sup>

Silverstein, (1981, 1) makes this point in LoA: “it is extremely difficult, if not impossible,” he writes, “to make a native speaker take account of those readily-discernable facts of speech as action that he has no ability to describe for us in his own language” (see also Lucy, 1993, 24–27).<sup>45</sup> Following this thread further, however, puts the comparison between Dyrbal and Wasco-Wishram Chinookan in a new light—as it forces us to consider the



presence of a Dyirbal ethno-metapragmatic term for mother-in-law speech as not merely evidence of awareness, but as a resource for thematization that Wasco-Wishram Chinookan lacked vis-à-vis the augmentative-neutral-diminutive cline.

The question is thus what people can do with the metapragmatic tools they have available, not what they can notice in a vacuum. This view opens the way to thinking about thematizability in system-relative terms, that is, in terms of what linguistic systems—as iterated semiotic (and meta-semiotic) experiences—mean for any account of metalinguistic thematization. This is not a history of *thought* or *consciousness*, but a history of *intersubjective attention* with consequences for linguistic structures (compare Blythe, 2013; Simpson, 2002), in which, the ability to thematize is, as Goodwin (1994, 626) put it, “lodged not in the individual mind but instead within a community of competent practitioners.” As we see it, the thematization is a self-propelling and self-entrenching process (with attractor properties, i.e., with states that are easier to get into than out of). Something that has been thematized in one way in the past—say, the *Guwal* code in Dyirbal or a lexical tone in Saek—is easier to thematize that way in the future because that past thematization has *caused* the target to become more thematizable by knowers of the language.

This argument may initially appear circular or deterministic, as the watered-down caricature of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis has appeared circular and deterministic to many commentators outside of linguistic anthropology. But it is not. We are pointing out that people are more capable of thematizing a form in the here-and-now if they have experienced (either uttered or heard) related thematizations in the past. The sense of circularity only comes from conflating these two-time scales: that of unfolding, microgenetic/enchronic interaction, on the one hand, and the diachronic basis of that unfolding interaction—that is, the semiotic patterns that make it intelligible—on the other. One of linguistic anthropology's key take-aways, built upon and refined by Silverstein's foundational work, is the fact that historical structures and habits of meaning-making always shape and are in turn shaped by communicative events in interaction.

The capacity to thematize a given object-language is thus not separate from its history as a metalinguistic object; as if speakers were perceiving it—and its formal and functional features—for the first time (Carr, 2010, chap. 6; cf. Jaeger and Weatherholtz, 2016).<sup>46</sup> To repurpose Geertz (1973, 5) on Weber, humans always encounter signs suspended in rich webs of indexical meaning that we ourselves have spun. The conditions for thematization are likewise historically contingent and semiotically relative.

## CONCLUSION

In examining puzzles of metalanguage and linguistic ideology, we have moved the focus from cognition to interaction. Following the thrust of Silverstein's argument, we have taken the “limits of awareness”—framed as a matter of attentional access, a dyadic relation between a linguistic agent and some aspect of language—and reframed it as the limits of thematization—a matter of access to *joint*-attention, whereby agents' attention to an aspect of language is aligned. With our distinction between presentational and referential thematizations, and sub-distinctions within these kinds, we offer tools for understanding how such thematizations work. In our analysis of the challenges for isolability and the power of conventionalization, we find features that invite (or hinder) thematizations of one kind or another.

Our account also suggests new places to look for explanations of why certain linguistic forms become loaded with ideology. We find it no surprise that the ‘heavy/light’ distinction, with its broad, abstract reference, emerged in the multilingual NNT Watershed. Across the world, contact between distinct linguistic varieties appears both to invite people to thematize

contrasting aspects of language that might otherwise be relatively automatized, and to present people with poetic juxtapositions between languages. In Mainland Southeast Asia, multilingual contact frequently engenders thematizations of suprasegmentals more specifically. This is clear in part from orthographic history. Many scripts that mark tone have emerged in well documented moments of contact (Diller, 1992; Diller, 1996; Diller, 2017), in which inter-linguistic interaction fueled metalinguistic salience (on relations between bilingualism and salience, see Kuo and Anderson, 2008, 43–44). In these situations, contact has fueled salience both from the outside in, as outsiders noticed and struggled to explicitly articulate the new linguistic forms they were discovering, and from the inside out, as speakers of tonal languages, for instance, have aimed to make their languages more transparent to foreigners (e.g., Condominas, 1990, 71).

This idea that contact produces new insights—that it works to force the tacit into some kind of explicitness—has long been at the heart of anthropological projects, which emphasize what ‘outsiders’ notice that ‘locals’ may miss.<sup>47</sup> This idea also belongs in contemporary discussions of metalinguistic thematization: where the meeting of people who use different linguistic systems—and the subsequent semiotic clash of stances (Keane, 2014)—can prompt new motives for and routines of thematization.<sup>48</sup>

These considerations of contact lead naturally to our conclusion. The limits of metalanguage and linguistic ideology are not the limits of awareness. They do not arise directly from the decontextualized probability that some bit of language will be the private, psychological object of an individual's attention. They are the relative limits of thematization. Metalanguage is constrained by the possibility that a bit of language can be the public object of joint attention, a matter of social coordination. And that possibility is itself constrained by the available metasemiotic resources and other conventionalized routines of thematization that are at hand. Understanding the problem as such allows us to investigate what—in a given semiotic context—inhibits and enables thematization. It allows us to explore not the psychological limits but the semiotic resources for and properties of thematization in interaction. And, of course, it invites us to continue to explore why it all matters, to ask: What motivates people to focus on some bits of semiotic practice over others? What is at stake, not just as people ruminate alone, but as they, from moment to moment, communicate together?

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> With regard to “limits”, as Silverstein (1981, 1) points out, his argument is about “relative ease and relative difficulty”, not hard limits. We use *limits* here in that relative sense.
- <sup>2</sup> In earlier writings, Silverstein similarly framed the problem as “a central issue in the *limitations of awareness* of native speakers about their own pragmatic systems” (Silverstein, 1977a, 150, emphasis added; see also Silverstein, 1976, 49), echoing Whorf, (2007, 221; emphasis added): “The phenomena of language are background phenomena, of which the talkers are *unaware* or, at the most, very dimly aware.” Silverstein (1981, 18–19) describes his argument as a generalization of Whorf’s observation that “the native speaker...is hopelessly at the mercy of...‘surface’ lexicalized forms....” Years later, he described Whorf’s argument as such: “Pointing out laypersons’ exceedingly limited reflexive consciousness of covert, modulus categories, Whorf, like Boas, posited a principled chasm between what speakers of a language actually psychologically process—and inclusively code—about denotable “reality” and how they rely on their language’s relatively overt and selective categories in their rationalizing ontological claims about “what is ‘out there’” (Silverstein in Sidnell and Enfield, 2012, 325). On a related discussion of Silverstein’s view of Sapir’s ‘psychologism,’ and its differences from Boas’s and Whorf’s, see Sapir (1911) and Silverstein (1986, 89–91).
- <sup>3</sup> Choksi and Meek (2016, 229) make a similar point when they define “salience” over and against “awareness.” They write: “salience is a social-culturally entangled and constitutive aspect of a process of representation, where part of what is representable may be cognitively derived and the other part may be socio-culturally derived.” On different approaches to this broader question, see McGowan and Babel (2020).
- <sup>4</sup> On notions of joint attention see Tomasello, Carpenter, Call, Behne, and Moll (2005) and Enfield and Sidnell (2022).
- <sup>5</sup> Contemporary scholars have generally attended less to the relative salience of forms than the content of language ideologies (Woolard, 2008; but see Babel, 2016a; Choksi and Meek, 2016; Errington, 1985; McGowan and Babel, 2020; Mertz and Yovel, 2009; Osgood et al., 1954, 51–54; Preston, 1996; Preston, 2016).
- <sup>6</sup> Angus Wheeler prepared this map.
- <sup>7</sup> In this way, the NNT Watershed is what Neustupny called a *sprechbund*; see Hymes (2005, 54–55).
- <sup>8</sup> People in the NNT Watershed also—with varying degrees of conventionalization—describe short sounds, long sounds, cut sounds, untied sounds, use-your-tongue-sounds (trills, especially), hard sounds, easy sounds, and more.
- <sup>9</sup> In other cases, heavy/light does seem to implicate more classically “pragmatic” subjects, for example, when its use is said to correlate with distinctions in speaker origin and ethnicity (see Enfield and Zuckerman, *In Press*; Zuckerman and Enfield, 2022).
- <sup>10</sup> “In pragmatics, by our understanding, we encompass the totality of indexical relationships between occurrent signal forms and their contexts of occurrence, regardless of whether such contexts are other occurrent signal forms (what is generally termed the CO-TEXT from the perspective of some occurrent signal form) or not specifically such (whence the general, nondifferentiated use of the term CONTEXT as inclusive of co-text, as well as in contradistinction to it)” (Silverstein, 1993, 36).
- <sup>11</sup> Silverstein’s two additional dimensions detailed how native speakers might treat pragmatic forms in explicit metapragmatic discourse: decontextualized deducibility and metapragmatic transparency. We draw on these ideas below.
- <sup>12</sup> There is perhaps a lingering question about whether the fact that they combine with other elements to create referential forms makes them unavoidably referential. One of our anonymous reviewers argued that because phonological features “contribute to the unavoidable referentiality of lexical units” they are themselves unavoidably referential. But with the exception of monophonemic words, identifying and isolating a phoneme, let alone a “distinctive feature” or F0 contour over the course of a vowel in the case of an idealized primarily pitch-based tone system, does not mean that one has isolated a “unit of reference.” Silverstein (1994) implies this in his discussion of Wasco Wishram sound symbolism in a later paper, where he describes such “sound structure” as having close to “zero autonomous power with respect to reference-and-predication.” There he describes how sound symbolism makes Martinet’s second articulation newly denotationally relevant in a way that it normally *is not*: “we must view denotational iconicism as one of the ‘breakthrough’ modes of semiosis, in which a system of sound structure (with its own, merely distribution functions of making segmental form), normally subordinated to virtual zero autonomous power with respect to reference-and-predication in the doubly articulated structure of language” (Silverstein, 1994, 42). See also Silverstein’s (1977b, 127–128) related discussion of more undeniably non-referential “phonological indexes” such as “intonation patterns individuals use that identify their social class or the particular role in terms of which they are interacting with us by means of speech (for example, delivering a sermon)... That they are part of the sound system of language usually pushes them out of the realm of features on which we can secure accurate testimony from native participants.”

- <sup>13</sup> That these are called “suprasegmentals” has no relevance to our analysis; we use that term because it is in currency, not as justification for their occasional violation of this dimension.
- <sup>14</sup> We write “suggest,” but agree with Sidnell (2021, 31), who points out the “wooliness” of these original definitions. He writes, “The notion of relatively presupposing is particularly mercurial—deference, for instance, is given as an example of a relatively presupposing indexical function in 1979 and as a relatively creative one in 1981. This apparent inconsistency can, no doubt, be fudged by reference to the ‘relatively’ qualifier, but it nevertheless points to the fact that these ideas are better thought of as suggestions for further investigation than research findings *per se*.”
- <sup>15</sup> Intriguingly, speakers of many languages distinguish between ‘heavy’ and ‘light’ sounds (e.g., in Australia; Alan Rumsey, Personal Communication; for discussion of similar contrasts, see Chumley and Harkness, 2013; Harkness, 2015; Sapir, 1975; Shayan, Ozturk, and Sicoli, 2011). See also Trần Trọng Kim (1940), who writes of Vietnamese, “There is something very difficult in the work (we are) doing which is that the original Vietnamese language has no means of self-categorization. Usually, people just follow the way of studying Confucian characters, using the notions of heavy words and light words to distinguish four types, namely: full words, empty words, half-full words, half-empty words, meaning heavy sounds/words, light sounds/words, somewhat heavy sounds/words, somewhat light sounds/words.” Thank you to Jack Sidnell for this reference and the translation.
- <sup>16</sup> Note that the distinction in forms of metaseiotic thematization draws from, but does not pattern entirely with, Silverstein’s (1993) broader Peircian distinction between three metapragmatic calibration types (see Nakassis, 2020).
- <sup>17</sup> We mean that they are poetic in the orientation (“set” or *einstellung*) they produce on the palpability of language. Jakobson describes the poetic function as operating syntagmatically, but presentational thematizations sometimes also work by way of paradigmatic juxtapositions between a ‘normal way’ of saying something and an ‘exaggerated way,’ along with co-occurring signs that mark off what is being done as presentational.
- <sup>18</sup> Mechanisms for making an utterance presentational resemble mechanisms for marking shifts of footing that increase ‘transparency’ for reported speech, e.g., referential resources such as *verbum dicendi*, poetic resources such as ‘contrastive individuation,’ and indexical resources such as rhythmic co-speech gestures (Agha, 2005).
- <sup>19</sup> After this third repetition, Zuckerman repeated *sambaaj1 kwaa6*, and BuaLaj responded, “that’s right” (*mèèn1 lèèw4*). With this response, BuaLaj evaluates the form, rather than the content, of Zuckerman’s utterance. This is more evidence that the utterance was construed as presentational.
- <sup>20</sup> The exchanges were strongly asymmetrical: when our consultants provided forms for us, we mostly responded with ‘thank you’ or ‘one more time please.’
- <sup>21</sup> Interestingly, we encountered some presentational thematizations in which L2 speakers jokingly characterized entire languages with caricatures of their most prominent sounds: Kri became a series of trilled Rs; ‘French’ became a barrage of *shə shə shə shəs* at different pitches.
- <sup>22</sup> We could also imagine a process of conventionalization by which ‘was -ing’ could take hold as a way of referring to this difficult to isolate form. Over time, the phrase might become more natural, much more routine than, say, the specialized technical term ‘English past continuous tense’ (see Osgood et al., 1954, 51–54).
- <sup>23</sup> In his *Introduction to the Handbook of American Indian Languages*, Boas (1963, 28) writes how those who “are grammatically trained” might overcome this hinderance: “a laconically inclined person might even remark, in reply to the statement *He plays well*, *-ed* which by his friends might be well understood. It is clear that in all these cases the single elements are isolated by a secondary process from the complete unity of the sentence.” One can also more easily perform sounds like *sss* on their own, as it were, in the frame of represented discourse.
- <sup>24</sup> Keep in mind, as well, that no two linguistic utterances of a form are ever identical. This is as clear from phonetic research as it is from BuaLaj’s repetitions of *sambaaj1 kwaa6* (compare Silverstein, 1994, 48).
- <sup>25</sup> These second and third limits on isolability relate to Silverstein’s criterion of ‘unavoidable referentiality’ insofar as units of reference tend to be morphemic and sonically independent.
- <sup>26</sup> An analog of this is the practice of ‘clapping syllables’ in primary school English classes.
- <sup>27</sup> This notion relates—although is distinct in scope from—Silverstein’s dimension of “metapragmatic transparency.”
- <sup>28</sup> We do not want to make any strong claim about what counts as “more” or “less” information, only to point out that metalanguages can characterize in different ways.
- <sup>29</sup> Many forms that appear to be less-characterizing are nevertheless characterizing in terms of the time and place of an utterance, its momentary features *in situ*, rather than some feature core to it. e.g., ‘The thing over there,’ vs. ‘the ceramic plate.’ On the denotational content of some pointing gestures, see Kendon and Versante (2003) and Kendon, (2004, 223).
- <sup>30</sup> In a different vocabulary, Kenneth Hale (1976, 40) describes using language games to inculcate such conventionalizations and the capacity to thematize otherwise tricky linguistic forms. He writes, “When the students learn



to use such verbs and enter into the spirit of the game, which they do rather quickly, their attention can be drawn to the fact that the prefixal portion of the verb changes in the ways which correspond to changes in the situation and its participants. Gradually, a conscious awareness of the meanings contributed by the prefixes can be developed, and, most important, students can be induced to articulate their understanding of what is happening in the verb word. This is essential, since the development of a way of talking about language, a 'terminology', is a fundamental aid in their later work. The particular terminology does not matter; though, clearly, the teacher can help the students to arrive at an efficient one."

- <sup>31</sup> Note that in the examples below, 'heavy/light' is used to predicate about other generic kinds (e.g., 'language'), but speakers also characterized 'heaviness/lightness' itself as a generic kind (e.g., 'Heavy sound is a loud sound'). We capture this latter use with parameter 11b above.
- <sup>32</sup> On tone, see Thurgood (2002, 31) and Wee (2019). Previous linguistic work in mainland Southeast Asia shows evidence that metalanguage need not distinguish the two sub-types of system. For example, Kuy speakers in Thailand associated Kuy's low register with low tones in Thai, and were drawn to writing forms in this Kuy register accordingly (Johnston, 1976, 266, 270).
- <sup>33</sup> This was a parenthetical; we have removed parentheses.
- <sup>34</sup> However, just as there has historically been less accounting of suprasegmental phonology than segmental phonology, so too is there less research into suprasegmental awareness than segmental awareness (Kuo and Anderson, 2008, 45).
- <sup>35</sup> That said, it is worth noting that, with much work, in some areas of phonological theory (e.g. optimality theory), prosody has played a central theoretical role.
- <sup>36</sup> That said, in Pinyin certain information may go unmarked, e.g., changes generated by tone sandhi.
- <sup>37</sup> Agha (2007, 119) makes the related point that such forms allow linguists to make meta-semantic queries, which often lead to empirically misleading findings about semiotic practice. He writes: "The sheer transparency or ease of reportability of facts of lexical sense obscures the critical role played by co-textual indexicals" (2007, 346). Silverstein (1993) has argued for the 'nomic' property of poetic contrasts and parallelisms, which implies that presentational thematizations could also be read as genericizing, albeit by way of a different mechanism.
- <sup>38</sup> Again, this relates to Silverstein's dimension of metapragmatic transparency. See Fleming (2018, 563) for a parallel discussion of the pragmatic-metapragmatic interface and how the "iconic identity between signal that accomplishes and signal that reports the accomplishment is not merely the artifact of a historical sequence but a synchronically productive dualism."
- <sup>39</sup> Dyirbal's 'mother-in-law' language is continuously segmentable, unavoidably referential, and presuppositional. It contrasts with the three-part, gradient distinction between 'augmentative,' 'neutral,' and 'diminutive' forms in Wasco-Wishram Chinookan (see Sapir, 1911; Silverstein, 1994), which is not unavoidably referential (it "operate[s] on utterance-fractions that are completely independent of units of reference"), continuously segmentable (it operates on scattered phonemes in an overall sound shape), nor relatively presuppositional (the forms communicate an attitude which thereby "becomes a contextual reality with effects on how the interaction then proceeds)" (Silverstein, 1981, 9–10).
- <sup>40</sup> He also summarizes his second point, which, we argue, more squarely concerns patterns of metapragmatic discourse, rather than "awareness": "And we can bound the kind of evidence the native speaker can give us in terms of deducible referential propositions about functional forms maximally transparent to description as speech events" (Silverstein, 1981, 19).
- <sup>41</sup> It is also worth pointing out that the system had not been used regularly since the 1930s, so its pragmatics were clearly different at the time of elicitation. It is thus somewhat odd to point to its 'presuppositional' nature, as Silverstein does, because at the time when Dixon was studying mother-law-language, the pragmatic function of using it (say, demonstrating expertise in consultation with a researcher, a relatively creative act) had clearly changed.
- <sup>42</sup> As Babel (2016b, 202) points out, the speaker may have also had other (social) reasons for not repeating the "uncomplimentary augmentative form." See also Moore's (1988, 465) related discussion of the "reluctance of contemporary younger speakers and semispeakers to provide Chinookan noun and verb forms under standard elicitation-interview conditions..."
- <sup>43</sup> On the differential "spotty" awarenesses of both linguists and lay people, see Voegelin and Voegelin (1976, 97).
- <sup>44</sup> This does not mean that people have more refined experiential percepts of a given linguistic form, in fact, it may work against forming such a detail-rich percept (Dodson, Johnson, and Schooler, 1997). On the issue of conventionalized meta-languages, compare Preston's (1996) discussion of "folk culture artifacts" as kinds of language that are described in relatively routinized and stereotypical ways.
- <sup>45</sup> Silverstein (1976, 48) makes a version of the same point: "The metapragmatic characterization of speech must constitute a referential event, in which pragmatic norms are the objects of description. So obviously the extent to which a language has semantic lexical items which accurately refer to the indexed variables, to the constituents

of speech, and to the purposive function is one measure of the limits of metapragmatic discussion by a speaker of that language." And, continuing into the next section, "But more importantly, it would appear that the nature of the indexical elements themselves, along formal-functional, dimensions, limits metapragmatic awareness of language users" (1976, 49).

- <sup>46</sup> Carr (2010, 194) writes: "metalinguistic awareness has more to do with situated practice—and, more specifically, the skills one develops in one's history as a speaker in situ—than with the nature of the linguistic signs in question."
- <sup>47</sup> This distinction is embroiled with the history of colonial and post-colonial research, in which the unmarked form of study is 'outsiders' studying 'others' (Fabian, 1983; see Reyes, 2021 on post-colonial semiotics); this is distinct from the *epistemological* fact that someone otherwise unfamiliar with a semiotic system may see things differently than those who control that system would.
- <sup>48</sup> For example, thematization is not necessary for language learning, but it is certainly useful for it. Ideologies of what language is and how it works are also commonly brought to explicit form when those who hold them interact with frequency (Makahara and Schieffelin, 2007, 15; Whorf, 2007, 73; Woolard, 2008, 441). In interactions, people can shift from *perceiving* differences to *noticing* them (Squires, 2016) and then, at times, alter their linguistic practices as a result (on the relation between awareness and linguistic change, see Auer, Barden, and Grosskopf, 1998; Babel, 2016a; Errington, 1985; Labov, 1972; Nycz, 2016).

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