

John Gumperz: an appreciation

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I will always count myself exceedingly fortunate to have attended graduate school at the University of California, Berkeley during the second half of the 1970s, and to have worked closely with John Gumperz just when he was developing the theoretical and methodological framework that is now known as interactional sociolinguistics. (No one referred to it that way at the time.) Though I was pursuing a degree in linguistics while Gumperz was in the anthropology department, the trek uphill from Dwinelle (where the linguistics department was housed) to the Language Behavior Research Lab (where Gumperz worked and taught) felt like a short distance intellectually. Not only had Gumperz's own training at the University of Michigan been in linguistics, but his focus on the language of everyday interaction was consonant with the then-current work of the linguistics faculty members I was also working with: Wallace Chafe, who had become interested in how people talk about events they had experienced or witnessed (the project that came to be known as the pear stories [Chafe 1980]) and Robin Lakoff, who had just published her groundbreaking *Language and Woman's Place* (1975), which pioneered the fields of language and gender and of politeness theory. An interest in examining the quotidian was happening, moreover, in other scholarly fields as well. Gumperz (1999: 456) credits Harold Garfinkel (1967) with turning sociological attention to the organization of everyday behavior and to the "practical reasoning" by which interactants interpret one another's moves. The same concerns also characterized work being done in Berkeley's philosophy department by H. P. Grice (1967), who had applied formal logic to everyday conversation, and John Searle (1969), who was developing his theory of speech acts.

The turn of attention to everyday language and interaction made this an exciting time to be in academia in general and at Berkeley in particular. But within this milieu, John Gumperz occupied a special place, because of his personal character and the way it shaped the character of his work. Every aspect of Gumperz's work reflects a pervasive and deep humanism. While the mainstream of linguistics was focusing on formal analysis of syntactic structures, Gumperz's research was grounded in real language use. His early research had

been based on field work conducted in India, Norway, and Central Europe during the 1950s and 1960s. And field work conducted in London in the 1970s provided the foundation for his development of interactional sociolinguistics. Furthermore, it was a concern with social justice that led him to investigate how culturally relative ways of using language could contribute to employment discrimination against London residents who had been born and raised in Pakistan, India, or the West Indies. Toward this end, he adapted Erickson's (1975) notion of "gatekeeping encounters" in which interviewers assess interviewees' qualifications for positions or benefits, based on verbal interchanges. Gumperz showed that subtle differences in ways of speaking could lead to inaccurate assessment of the interviewees' abilities or intentions. Thus, his theory and method are grounded in his concern for the resulting injustice. Yet miscommunication is of interest, to Gumperz and to us, not only because it can help address societal injustice and personal frustration, but also because it makes visible elements of communicative practice that go unnoticed when communication proceeds without perceptible trouble. In other words, analysis of miscommunication is also a heuristic device serving the broader goal of discovering how language works in interaction.

Erickson cites, in his article in this issue, two of his favorite Gumperz examples. My own favorite demonstrates Gumperz's concept of contextualization cues; their central role in affecting interactional outcomes; and the inextricability of real-world issues such as job discrimination, on one hand, and the academic pursuit of understanding how language works to create meaning in interaction, on the other. In this example, Gumperz (1982) used the tape recording of real interaction to investigate charges and counter-charges among food servers and customers in the employee cafeteria of a British airport where servers of South Asian background had recently been hired for the first time. The cafeteria customers complained of rudeness on the part of the South Asian servers, who in turn complained that they were experiencing prejudice and discrimination. By audiotaping on-site naturally occurring interactions, Gumperz identified a small contrast in the use of paralinguistic features that accounted in part for both complaints.

Customers who selected a meat course had to be asked whether or not they wanted gravy. Both British and South Asian servers made this offer by uttering a single word, *gravy*. British servers, however, said this word with rising intonation while South Asian servers said it with falling intonation. These contrasting intonational patterns resulted in very different interpretations: British customers heard the rising-intonation contour as a question, and consequently a polite offer: "Would you like gravy?" But they heard the falling-intonation contour as a statement, "This is gravy," which, because its proposition was obvious, sounded rude to them; it seemed to imply something like, "This is gravy. Take it or leave it." When the audiotape was played for the South Asian

employees, they regarded it as a self-evident example of discrimination because they were so obviously saying the same thing as their British counterparts, yet they alone were being accused of rudeness. When their supervisor and English teacher explained how the different intonation patterns resulted in different meanings, the South Asian servers understood the reactions which they had previously found incomprehensible. At the same time, the supervisors learned that the falling intonation was, for the South Asian employees, simply the normal way of asking the question in that context.

This example illustrates a number of essential aspects of Gumperz's work. First, it shows that contextualization cues such as pitch and intonation are crucial to signaling and interpreting the meaning of words spoken. Second, it shows that the cultural variability of contextualization conventions can contribute to the perception and the reality of social inequality and discrimination. Finally, this example also illustrates the method by which key segments of an audio-taped interaction are replayed to participants in order to elicit their comments, which become another type of data to be analyzed. This last element is one that seems to me particularly important. Gumperz's inclusion of the workers themselves in the research process evinces not only his concern for their sense of injustice but also his respect for them as individuals whose lives are poignantly influenced by cultural differences in the use of contextualization cues. His interest in the workings of language is inseparable from his concern for human beings.

I also see Gumperz's humanism in the way that his approach re-integrates sound, sense, and grammar, as a corrective to Saussure's distinction between *langue* and *parole* as well as Chomsky's between competence and performance. Moreover, Gumperz shows that features Saussure devalued as "marginal" (such as intonation, pitch, and amplitude) are inseparable from those Saussure valued as "core" (such as syntax and grammatical affixes)—and they are of core importance in communicating meaning (Gumperz 1982: 16). Also holistic is his notion of speech activity, influenced both by Bateson's (1972 [1955]) of framing and Hymes's (1974) of speech event, to highlight the goal-oriented character of an interaction, by reference to which—and only by reference to which—an utterance can be interpreted. In other words, Gumperz's view of how language works is holistic, and his focus on individuals' experience in interaction is humanistic.

The holistic and humanistic character of his approach to language and interaction are part of what makes John Gumperz so inspiring, both personally and professionally. He inspires by his sense of language as an integrated whole, inseparable from the people who use it in their daily lives. He inspires by the deep humanity that imbues all his work with a concern for social justice. He inspires by the scope of his historical perspective and the breadth of his knowledge, encompassing the fields of linguistics, anthropology, sociology, and

philosophy. And he inspires by remaining active and productive professionally into his centennial decade, thereby also providing us the occasion to honor him in this special issue.

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