

## A DISCUSSION WITH JOHN J. GUMPERZ'

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**[1] CARLO PREVIGNANO:** I'd like to begin by asking you about your current research projects.

**[2] JOHN J. GUMPERZ:** My interests are both theoretical and applied. Currently I'm engaged in empirical research on classroom interaction with eight- and nine-year-old Spanish/English bilinguals. I use methods of conversational and discourse analysis to formulate hypotheses about the indirect reasoning processes students employ in problem-solving. These processes are for the most part indirect in that they rely on implicit, taken-for-granted presuppositions to convey information that adults would expect to be overtly lexicalized. By formulating explicit, verifiable analytical assumptions about what these processes are and about how children of that age rely on them and talk about them with their peers, we hope to help teachers gain better insights into their students' ways of dealing with the learning task. Ultimately, we intend to make training films illustrating such reasoning processes, using audiovisual techniques similar to those employed in the B.B.C. Crosstalk films,<sup>2</sup> to reveal the possible linguistic causes of misunderstandings in intercultural communication.

As with my earlier research, such empirical studies are directly related to my theoretical interest in showing how detailed analyses of communicative practices can illuminate basic issues in social theory. I'm about to begin working on a book which I hope will bring out the import of sociolinguistically oriented pragmatic analysis for our understanding of social process. Theorists of many persuasions argue that the social environments in which we live and act are dialogically constituted. The main question I pose is: how does verbal

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<sup>1</sup> This discussion took place on 31.3.95 at the Institute of Linguistics, University of Bologna, Italy, on the occasion of the 1995 Bologna Round Table on *Dialogue Analysis: Units, relations and strategies beyond the sentence*, organized by the International Association for Dialogue Analysis in honour of its President, Sorin Stati. Transcribed and edited by Susan Eerdmans; revised February 1996.

<sup>2</sup> Gumperz, J.J., T.C. Jupp & C. Roberts 1979. *Crosstalk: A study of cross-cultural communication*. London: National Centre for Industrial Language Training in association with the B.B.C..

communication affect such dialogic processes and to what extent do these processes depend on shared linguistic knowledge?

My perspective on verbal communication is grounded in earlier studies in Ethnography of Communication. The key insight here is that ethnographically-based sociolinguistic analysis, if it is to be empirically viable, must focus on specific speech events, defined as interactively constituted, culturally framed encounters, and not attempt to explain talk as directly reflecting the norms, beliefs and values of communities seen as disembodied, hypothetically uniform wholes. To look at talk as it occurs in speech events is to look at communicative practices. Along with others, I claim that such practices constitute an intermediate and in many ways analytically distinct level of organization. A sociological equivalent here is Erving Goffman's 'Interaction Order', a level of organization which bridges the linguistic and the social. Goffman's work on this topic has greatly influenced the conversational analysts' argument that conversation is separate both from grammar and from macro-social structures and must be analysed at the level of 'activity' (their use of this term is different from my own, see later in this discussion). In my approach to interaction, I take a position somewhat between that of Erving Goffman and Harold Gattinkel. The former looked at encounters from an ethologists perspective, while the latter was concerned with the interpretive processes that make interaction work.

The current trend in my work began with the 1982 book *Discourse Strategies*.<sup>3</sup> Apart from its empirical focus on interethnic and intercultural communication, this book can also be seen as a first attempt to explore the role of typified communicative practices in interaction, what levels of linguistic signalling they reflect, how they relate to speakers' communicative and social background and how they affect interactive outcomes in key encounters. It is the focus on the interactive and therefore social import of the fine details of verbal communication that distinguishes my work from others. One of my main concerns is with how we can analyze communicative practices in such a way as to account for participants' ability to create and maintain communicative involvement and to achieve their communicative ends.

By background I am a linguist trained in the tradition of Saussure, Sapir and Bloomfield. Structuralism has been severely and on the whole convincingly criticized by Bourdieu and a host of others. Yet I believe that the structuralists' basic insights into linguistic, that is, phonological and syntactic competence and their approach to speaking as a partially subconscious process, continue to be useful. The problems arise in analyses of everyday talk. In re-analysing my ethnographic field data on communicative practices for *Discourse Strategies*, I began to realize that Saussurean phonological and grammatical structures defined in terms of finite sets of oppositions and truth condition semantics could not alone account for the relevant dialogic and discursive facts of everyday talk. These insights are of course not unique. Along with others in my field, I became aware of the semantic importance of context. Gregory Bateson had long talked

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<sup>3</sup> Gumperz, J.J. 1982. *Discourse Strategies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

about communication being both context-creating and context-dependent. Conversational analysts provide impressive empirical evidence to show how interpretations shift as part of the on-going sequential ordering of an interaction.<sup>7</sup> But I argue that sequential ordering cannot be taken as a structural given. It presupposes active conversational involvement on the part of speakers, listeners and audience members. The ability to create and maintain such involvement rests on shared conversational inferences.

I have proposed the notions of contextualization cues and contextualization processes as a way of accounting for the functioning of linguistic signs in these inferential processes. Contextualization cues are a class of what pragmaticians have called indexical signs, that serve to retrieve the contextual presuppositions conversationalists rely on in making sense of what they see and hear in interactive encounters. They are pure indexicals in that they have no propositional content. That is, in contrast to other indexicals like pronouns or discourse markers, they signal only relationally and cannot be assigned context-free lexical meanings. Yet they play a major role in transforming what linguists refer to as discursive structures into goal-oriented forms of action. A main aim of my current work on discourse and conversation is to show how indexical signs, including prosody, code- and style-switching and formulaic expressions, interact with symbolic (i.e. grammatical and lexical) signs, sequential ordering of exchanges, cultural and other relevant background knowledge to constitute social action.

This, in brief, is my long-term research programme. In my current writing, I am attempting to integrate the various strains of thought I have alluded to above, together with my empirical findings on urban communicative practices, into the outline of a coherent theoretical framework. Sociolinguistic explanation, if it is to be relevant to today's concerns, cannot implicitly accept traditional categories of language, culture and society. I believe that interaction at the level of discursive or communicative practices (as Hanks calls them in his recent important book by that title)<sup>4</sup> must be seen as separate from either linguistic or socio-cultural processes. It is constituted by the interplay of linguistic, social and cultural/ideological forces and governed or constrained by partly universal and partly locally-specific organizational principles. My argument is that systematic investigation of these principles can provide a vantage point for an empirically-based reworking of the established traditions that continue to follow structuralist practices of separating the linguistic from the social. The recent linguistic anthropologists' move from a Saussurian to a more inclusive, broader, Peircian semiotics, that distinguishes between symbolic and indexical signs, is a first step in that direction. Symbolic signs communicate via well-known grammatical and lexical rules. Indexical signs (and among them contextualization cues), on the other hand, communicate by virtue of direct conventional associations between signs and context, established or transmitted through previous communicative experience. Conversational inferences build on both signalling processes. A

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<sup>4</sup> Hanks, W. 1996. *Language and Communicative Practice*. New York: Harper Collins.

major issue in my own research is to show, without abandoning what we have learned from structuralism, how and under what conditions discursive practices work a) to create communicative conventions and b) to affect interpretation.

[3] C.P.: Can you tell me some more about your idea of contextualization cues? How do you see these verbal and non-verbal constituents in relation to, for example, their function? Do you assume there is a one-to-one mapping? Because this, in my opinion, is a problem. If you can find a sort of one-to-one mapping or relationship between form (cues) and function, everything is fine, but in pragmatics there are usually many-to-many relationships.

Another related problem: you introduced the idea of discourse strategies more than fifteen years ago. Garfinkel and others were talking about inference and...

[4] J.J.G.: Inference and sequentiality.

[5] C.P.: Inference and procedures. Do you see a difference between ethnomethods or ethnoprocures and your strategies?

[6] J.J.G.: If we accept that a) interpretation is always context-dependent and b) contextual presuppositions shaping interpretations are themselves subject to constant change in the course of an interaction, then we cannot expect to find one-to-one mappings of form to meanings. There are always several possible interpretations. Contextualization cues, along with other indexical signs, serve to retrieve the frames (in Goffman's sense of the term) that channel the interpretive process by 'trimming the decision-making tree' and limiting the range of possible understandings. In talking about the functioning of indexical signs in interpretation, it becomes necessary to distinguish between meaning in the linguist's sense of reference, and situated inferences. The latter are crucial in communicative practice. In everyday talk, situated inferences always take the form of assessment of what a speaker intends to convey by means of a message and these are often quite different from propositional content. For example, if you and Paolo had been talking, and I asked you, "What did you just do?", you will not answer, "I made a statement" or "I performed a speech act." A more likely answer would be, "I asked him for a favour" or "I asked him if he was free this evening." Moreover, even if you had said, "I asked him a question," I would not take this as referring to grammatical or speech act categories, but rather as telling me what you wanted from him. Communicative practices are actions, and conversational inferences are made by human agents, acting in the real world.

With respect to Garfinkel: in arguing that all communication is intentional and based on inferences, I build on Garfinkel's notion of inferential process. But Garfinkel is not specific as to what he means by the 'historical method' by which members' interpretive processes can be retrieved, apart from saying that we need to resort to background information on how and why a particular inference came about. How do we know what aspects of background knowledge are relevant at any one time, and is extra-communicative background knowledge enough? We must assume that information about contextual frames is communicated as part of the process of interacting, and therefore it becomes necessary to be clearer about the specifics of what happens in the interaction as such to assess what is intended. Conversational analysts set out to do this, and

their work has brilliantly shown what can be learned through turn-by-turn sequential analyses. But, as I suggested, sequential analysis alone cannot by itself account for situated interpretation. It describes just one of the many indexical processes that affect inferencing. I'd like to argue that assessments of communicative intent at any one point in an exchange take the form of hypotheses that are either confirmed or rejected in the course of an exchange. That is, I adopt the conversational analysts' focus on members' procedures, but apply it to inferencing. The analytical problem then becomes not just to determine what is meant, but to discover how interpretive assessments relate to the signalling processes through which they are negotiated.

But how can we overcome the inherent ambiguity of inferential processes? In my empirical studies, I have worked out a set of procedures along the following lines. Analysis begins with turn-by-turn scanning at two levels of analysis, content and rhythmic organization. The aim is to isolate sequentially-bounded units, marked off from others in the recorded data by some degree of thematic coherence and by beginnings and ends detectable through co-occurring shifts in content, prosody, tempo or other formal markers. Lectures, ceremonies of various kinds, interviews, that is, named units of the type normally studied by ethnographers of communication, are instances of such events. But event sequences can also be isolated in everyday conversations and other casual encounters, where, for instance, narrative sequences may alternate or be interspersed with discussion, argument, banter and the like. In performing this segmentation, we seek to discover natural units of interaction that contain empirical evidence that confirms our analyst's interpretations, evidence against which to test assumptions about what is intended elsewhere in the sequence. Such event sequences then form the basic units for the analysis of conversational inferencing. They vary in length from longer sequences, which in turn can contain many sub-events, to brief three-part exchanges of move, counter-move and confirmation or disconfirmation.

In phase two of the analysis, events are transcribed. The goal here is to prepare 'interactional texts' by setting down on paper all those perceptual cues - verbal and nonverbal, segmental and nonsegmental, prosodic, paralinguistic and other cues - which past and ongoing research show speakers and listeners demonstrably rely on as part of the inferential process. This enables us not only to gain insights into situated understandings, but also to isolate recurrent form-context relationships and show how they contribute to interpretation. These relationships can then be studied comparatively across events, to yield more general hypotheses about members' contextualization practices.

To return to conversational inference and its role in communicative practice. Let me give you some concrete examples to show how I view the process of understanding. Some time ago, while I was driving to the office, my radio was tuned to a classical music station. At the end of the programme, the announcer, a replacement for the regular host who was returning the next day, signed off with the following words: "I've enjoyed being with you these last two weeks." I had not been listening very carefully, but the extra-strong accent on

'you' in a syntactic position where I would have expected an unaccented pronoun caught my attention. At first the speaker's words seemed to suggest that he intended to produce the first part of a formulaic exchange of compliments. But since there was no one else with him on the programme, I inferred that by the way he contextualized his talk, he was indirectly - without putting it 'on record' - implicating the second part, "I hope you have enjoyed listening to me."<sup>5</sup> A second, somewhat more complex example, comes from my analysis of the cross-examination transcript of the victim in a rape trial. Counsel: "You knew at the time that the defendant was interested in you, didn't you?" Victim: "He asked me how I'd been... just stuff like that."<sup>6</sup>

In both cases, I had to search my memory of past communicative experience to construct a likely scenario or narrative plot that might suggest possible interpretations. My initial hypothesis in example one conflicted with what I knew about the radio programme, and this triggered a search for a different, more plausible, scenario. In the second case, I relied on what I knew about cross-examinations as adversarial proceedings, where the attorney attempts to expose weaknesses in the defendant's testimony. But while these general facts tell us something about participants' motives in their choice of verbal strategy, we need to turn to what they actually said to understand what they intended to convey. By the words he chose, and by the way he contextualized his talk, the attorney raised the possibility that defendant and victim had had a prior relationship. The victim's move, on the other hand, positioned as it is immediately after the attorney's question, implicitly argues for a different scenario, one where the two were merely casual acquaintances. In this way, she sought to deny and in a sense ward off the questioner's potential attack on her testimony.

I use the term 'activity type' or 'activity' to refer to the above type of constructs or 'envisonments', to borrow Fillmore's term. My claim is that all interpretation rests on such constructs. Activities are an aspect of Goffmanian frames and are subject to constant change in the course of the exchange. That is, they do not apply to events as wholes, they apply to each component move. I argue that ultimately all interpretation at the level of discursive practice relies on these constructs.

This view of understanding has some similarity to Fillmore's notion of 'scene' that he discusses in his work on the semantics of understanding. But whereas Fillmore is concerned with physical settings, I take more of a social perspective. I see activities as evoking the actions of actors engaged in strategically formulating and positioning their moves in order to accomplish communicative ends in real-life encounters. In so doing, they rely on their

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<sup>5</sup> See Gumperz, J.J. 1996. *The linguistic and cultural relativity of conversational inference*. In J.J. Gumperz & S. Levinson (eds.), *Rethinking Linguistic Relativity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 374-406.

<sup>6</sup> See Gumperz, J.J. 1995. *Mutual inferencing in conversation*. In I. Marková, C.F. Graumann & K. Foppa (eds.), *Mutualities in Dialogue*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp.101-123.

presuppositions about mutual rights and obligations, as well as on ideologies of language and individual personalities, to get their message across. This implies that, in addition to meaning assessment in the established sense, there are always social relationships that are continuously negotiated and renegotiated by means of the same interpretive processes by which content is assessed.

It is useful to distinguish between two levels of inference in analyses of interpretive processes: a) global inferences of what an exchange is about and what mutual rights and obligations apply, what topics can be brought up, what is wanted by way of a reply, as well as what can be put into words and what is to be implied and b) local inferences concerning what is intended with any one move and what is required by way of a response. In this way it becomes possible to account for changes in frame as a function of the sequential positioning of moves. Both levels of interpretation involve activities as cognitive constructs: the first is related to what Goffman calls 'framing', while the second deals with something like the conversational analyst's 'preference organization'. While contextualization cues assist in retrieving the knowledge on which activity constructs are based, they do not work in isolation. Interpretation always relies on symbolic, lexical and indexical signs. But as pure indexicals, contextualization cues are usually produced and interpreted without conscious reflection, and are therefore particularly useful in revealing frequently unnoticed aspects of the interpretive process that tend to be highly sensitive to cultural variability.

I'm not claiming of course that these methods solve the problem of interpretive ambiguity. The aim is to find likely solutions that are plausible in that they show how component actions cohere in the light of the event as a whole, be it a three-part string of moves or a longer encounter. This is of course quite different from assessing the truth or falsity of specific interpretations. The method resembles conversational analytic procedures of reconstructing the general procedures members employ in formulating specific actions. I differ from conversational analysts in that my concern is with situated, on-line interpretation. I want to show both what the most likely inferences are and how participants arrive at them. In studies of intercultural and interethnic communication, these methods have been useful in detecting systematic differences in interpretive practices affecting individuals' ability to create and maintain conversational involvement.

**[7] ALDO DI LUZIO:** How do you consider coherence? Is coherence dependent on the type of activity in which you are engaged?

**[8] J.J.G.:** Not exactly. Our assumptions about relevant activities determine our view of how the interaction coheres.

**[9] A.D.L.:** By 'type of activity', do you mean 'genre'?

**[10] J.J.G.:** Not quite. I use the term 'genre' for another level of pragmatic analysis, the ideological level. For me genre is not an analytical category, because, as I understand it, genre, at least in the Bakhtinian sense of the term, is better treated as an analyst's, or for that matter also a lay-person's, concept for referring to or labelling texts or speech exchanges.

[11] A.D.L.: A mode of speaking about something.

[12] J.J.G.: It's not just a 'mode' of speaking. When we speak of moral discourse as a speech genre, for example, we are making an ideologically-charged metapragmatic assessment. That is, we are engaging in a form of talk about talk. As I said above, I use the notion of 'activity' to refer to conversationalists' and analysts' hypotheses about what cognitive processes are involved in understanding, hypotheses that can then be validated by methods such as those I have outlined.

[13] C.P.: Could you add some remarks about your idea of linguistic convention, typification?

[14] J.J.G.: Yes, I don't want to use the term 'convention' in the linguist's sense of grammatical convention. I use convention as a general term in the lay sense, as the outcome of a process of typification. For instance, a...

[15] A.D.L.: Schutzian?

[16] J.J.G.: In the Schutzian sense. For example, Liliana Ionescu-Ruxandoiu<sup>7</sup> this morning was talking about pre-sequences. She said certain expressions can serve as pre-sequences. This reminded me of a field-work experience in a South Asian village where I lived for almost two years. People would come up to me in the street and say, "Dinner is ready, come on over." Once, when I seemed hesitant, the speaker said, "Don't you want to come? We've made dinner, why don't you join us?" I still hesitated. I didn't know what to do. Finally, thinking I had perhaps actually been invited and had forgotten about it and might offend them if I didn't come, I went along. Well, it turned out that I was...

[17] C.P.: Invited?

[18] J.J.G.: I was not invited, no. It was just a greeting. An invitation is a very solemn matter in the village. To invite someone, you send an emissary, a young man in your household, to give the invitation. And even then one doesn't go to the host's house until a second emissary comes to call and asks the guest to come over. This means that a special meal has been prepared and is now ready. So that to say, "Dinner is ready" to someone in the street, simply counts as a form of greeting.

[19] C.P.: This is a convention, a typification within a community.

[20] J.J.G.: One finds similar usages all over South Asia. In some parts of the continent they say, "Have you eaten yet?" as a way of conveying something like, "How are you?" Such conventions arose over time as outcomes of culturally specific processes of typification. They may reflect a time when people in farming communities did not have everything they wanted to eat.

[21] C.P.: So when you are confronted with this kind of utterance, if you come from another community, like myself, you take it as an invitation.

[22] J.J.G.: Exactly, as I did. In fact, once I went, and they had to prepare the food. And I don't know whether they had enough to feed me. They were not poor

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<sup>7</sup> Ionescu-Ruxandoiu, L. Pre-sequences as a conversational strategy. Paper presented at 1995 I.A.D.A. Round Table.

people - it was a wealthy village - but still, you know, the women had to get to work and make some more food.

**[23] C.P.:** To come back to your notion of contextualization cues. You said that you are not interested in the propositional content, but in the indexical function in the Peircian sense, versus the symbolic, is that right?

**[24] J.J.G.:** Yes, yes.

**[25] C.P.:** So you see cues as orienting people to...

**[26] J.J.G.:** Certain interpretations.

**[27] C.P.:** And what about the orienting relationship? You have a sort of addressee who has to be oriented to, who has to be instructed via cues...

**[28] J.J.G.:** That's right.

**[29] C.P.:** So there are different competences, repertoires. But let us assume that you have two people with just the same repertoire or competence. Faced with the same cue, they are supposed to be oriented in the same way, in the sense that they are supposed to reach the same referent...

**[30] J.J.G.:** The same inferences. Be able to draw similar inferences, yes.

**[31] C.P.:** But this is not always the case. Given these two people belonging to the same community, with the same repertoire of cues, are we sure that there are no cases of ambiguity, contrary to the one-to-one relationship?

**[32] J.J.G.:** There always are some ambiguities.

**[33] C.P.:** There always are, okay.

**[34] J.J.G.:** There usually are. Ambiguities always exist. This is why I emphasize that the basic issue is not whether or not people understand factual information, but whether or not participants in an encounter are able to attune to each other's interpretive processes. For example, ambiguities and misunderstandings always occur, but you need to be able to repair them. And since conversational repairs must, for reasons inherent to conversing, rely in large part on indirectness, repairs always make unusually high demands in the way of shared inferences. In the cross-examination example I gave before, it is not that the victim and the attorney were unable to draw similar inferences. On the contrary, given the way jury trials work, they chose intentionally to rely on shared interpretive conventions to convey conflicting accounts of what might have happened.

**[35] C.P.:** Weigand<sup>8</sup> speaks about coming to an understanding in dialogue, a sort of Habermasian idea. However, you are never sure you have reached a total agreement, a convergence of inferences, of schemata and so on. So misunderstanding is a human condition, and you are alone, in a certain sense, with your cues, facing the other person. And this is the reason why I see individuals as a bit like solipsistic entities. They just send and get cues, and cues about cues, trying, via them, to instruct the other's inferences or schema use.

**[36] J.J.G.:** But we are not really talking about individuals agreeing on what something means. Nor is it so easy to say when people have the same communicative background. Let me give another example. One of the very best

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<sup>8</sup> Weigand, E. The unit beyond the sentence. Paper presented at 1995 I.A.D.A. Round Table.

of my former students, a Nigerian, Niyi Akinnaso, was born in a Nigerian village. He was the first literate person in the community. His father, a local chief, was secretary of the farmers' cooperative and he used to keep accounts using a local mechanical device, something like an abacus. As a child, Niyi used to keep records for his father. He went to missionary school in the region and ultimately to the University, became an instructor there and then came to Berkeley in the U.S. for his Ph.D.. He now, has a professorship in the United States and specializes in issues of literacy.

Niyi and I now move in the same circles and are part of the same academic community. I talk with him about a range of academic and other issues in ways that I cannot with many others in the U.S., and would certainly never be able to talk to his father or anyone else in Nigeria, although Niyi can. Through participation in similar 'networks of relationships' over time, we have been socialized into similar network- specific communicative practices. Although our backgrounds are about as different as they could be, we share certain communicative conventions and interpretive practices. It is long-term exposure to similar communicative experience in institutionalized networks of relationship and not language or community membership as such that lies at the root of shared culture and shared inferential practices. In most people's lives, community membership is of course directly linked to participation in such networks of relationships, but in our post-industrial worlds, it is less and less possible to take this for granted.

Apart from cultural sharing in the face of differences in background, there are now also more and more cases of people brought up in what by ordinary criteria counts as the same community, but in whose case surface similarity of language and background hides deep underlying differences.

To go back to what I said about shared interpretations. It is not merely a question of what something 'means'. Ultimately, agreement on specific interpretation presupposes the ability to negotiate repairs and re-negotiate misunderstandings, agree on how parts of an argument cohere, follow thematic shifts and shifts in presuppositions, that is, share indexical conventions. The more basic issue is to show how these tasks are accomplished. And it is for this reason that my analysis puts so much stress on contextualization processes.

[37] **C.P.:** You start from the idea of metamesages a la Bateson or Watzlawick, and you seem to give great importance to these repair/adjustment procedures via these metacues, cues concerning other cues, or metapragmatic cues.

[38] **J.J.G.:** Actually, the first paper I did on this topic was a paper I gave in Urbino.<sup>9</sup>

[39] **C.P.:** Yes, 1974.

[40] **J.J.G.:** In the 1974 series, yes. That was my first, but I didn't have the theory then. But now...

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<sup>9</sup> Gumperz, J.J. 1974. *The Sociolinguistics of Interpersonal Communication*. Urbino, Italy: Centro Internazionale di Semiotica e Linguistica. Working Papers and Republications, n.33, serie C.

[41] C.P.: Yes, I think this metapragmatic activity is important in order to survive. If you don't have metapragmatic strategies, . . .

[42] J.J.G.: It is not only that you don't survive, you don't learn. You cannot profit from your own misunderstandings. And this clearly has to do with verbal ability at the level of communicative practices, because it is on such practices that our ability to assess and evaluate the significance of what we perceive rests.

[43] C.P.: In psychiatric cases, it's just these metapragmatic procedures that fail. You try, you try, and the other...

[44] J.J.G.: Exactly, exactly. I have had students who worked with family psychiatry transcripts, from the Watzlawick school. And although no complete analysis was done, it would seem that even in those cases, much could be learned from close turn-by-turn analysis of communicative practices.

[45] C.P.: Another point. You mentioned Garfinkel and you said, "I am a little bit in between Garfinkel..."

[46] J.J.G.: And Goffman.

[47] C.P.: And you said, "From Garfinkel, I took the problem of inferential processes."

[48] J.J.G.: That's right.

[49] C.P.: So let us discuss, if you agree, the problem of dialogue and reasoning, the reasoning required by dialogue. Because dialogue requires reasoning.

[50] J.J.G.: That's right, you're always reasoning. Conversational inference always involves reasoning in some form. You start - I'll use the term 'assessing' or 'assessment' - you start by assessing in order to be able to recall a message. You always ask yourself both, "What are they saying?" and "What do they intend?" Assessments begin at the level of phonetics, and segmental phonemes are of course important - you need to be able to assess whether for example you are hearing 'g' or 'k'. But rhythmic organization and prosody may be equally important in making the relevant assessment.

In fact, in my Urbino paper, which formed the basis for the first chapter of *Discourse Strategies*, I discussed the example of a graduate student who asked me after class, speaking in standard-like style, "Can I come to see you?" I replied, "Sure, come to the office," whereupon he went on to say in what seemed like old-fashioned Afro-American English, "Ahma git me a gig." At first I wondered why he chose to switch codes in this academic context. He usually spoke much like everyone else, so the switch must have been intentional. Was he rejecting the 'academic norm' of Standard English? It was only after discussing the incident with several other graduate students familiar with Afro-American interpretive traditions that I recognized that, by speaking the way he did, he was signalling that he was no longer addressing himself just to me, but to anyone who shared his interpretive conventions, that is, mainly - but not exclusively - the other African-Americans in the group. What he was trying to convey can roughly be paraphrased as: "I am doing something that minority people like myself have to do, get support where I can." In other words, when his utterance is interpreted in terms of what we know about the positions of African-Americans in the urban U.S. and in terms of cues such as the undiphthongized lengthened 'ah' instead of

'i' and the lengthened vowel in 'gig', as well as the highly-contoured intonation he used, it became clear that he was employing a formulaic expression, which, in the context at hand, indexically conveyed his message. He was not 'code-switching', but using metapragmatic strategies to convey a message.

In a related example from Discourse *Strategies*, a young elementary-school student, when asked to read, replied, "Ah cain't read." The teaching aid thought he meant to say that he was not able to read. Examples like this have often been cited in the literature on classroom learning in support of assertions that African-American students have more difficulty with literacy learning than others. But when we discussed this example with a group of African-American graduates, they pointed out that the expression carried contoured intonation and, given the expression's positioning after the tutor's question, they would interpret the student as saying essentially, "I don't want to do it right now. I want company in reading." On the basis of experiences like these, I became alerted to the fact that for those familiar with African-American conventions, the opposition between contoured and non-contoured intonation may be information-carrying. Such uses of prosody are not only found in African-American speech. Consider the following example I recently heard in Cambridge from someone talking about King's College: "Fellows of King's are well-known, *to* fellows of *King's*." The second (italicized) phrase is set off from the first and therefore foregrounded by lowering of pitch and volume, and this suggests that 'well-known' is restricted so as to highlight the interpretation that the compliment phrase applies only to other fellows of King's, not to the public at large. Understanding, as structuralists have taught us, always relies on selective perceptions based on our knowledge of oppositions. This is true for indexicals as well as for symbolic relationships. All interpretive assessments are relational (note the Saussurian heritage here). They are made with reference to something else, not necessarily directly represented in talk. But nevertheless, as the examples show, assessing involves reasoning which is intrinsically dialogic in the sense that positioning within an exchange is crucial.

[51] C.P.: Two other questions. What do you think about what could be called corpus pragmatics? And the other question, what do you think about the notion of pragmatic creativity?

[52] J.J.G.: Corpus pragmatics?

[53] C.P.: Or corpus linguistics, in this case for pragmatic analysis.

[54] J.J.G.: Okay, we always rely on a corpus, in the sense that to analyse anything at all in any depth we must prepare written transcripts. My problem with corpus linguistics is that it treats talk as if it were a literary text. And as to corpus pragmatics, pragmatics always requires us to take context seriously. This suggests we cannot base our analyses on a single corpus, we must work comparatively. We must find ways of systematically contrasting our analysis with other comparable ones carried out under different but comparable contextual conditions. This requires us to address the question of the criteria we use for determining similarities and differences in and across contexts.

A second question that arises, if we take seriously the need for comparative analyses in pragmatics, is the distinction between communicative practice as a form of action and language as linguistic form. This is an issue that has only begun to be addressed in current comparative research in linguistic anthropology, but so far it has not, as far as I know, been systematically considered in corpus linguistics or, for that matter, in pragmatics.

[55] C.P.: When talking about corpus linguistics, I have in mind the rather new wave of electronic corpora.

[56] J.J.G.: But you mean . . . ?

[57] C.P.: Sinclair, for example, John Sinclair's work.

[58] J.J.G.: John Sinclair, yes, and the Lund people.

[59] C.P.: For example, yes. But the problem, from your perspective, is how to record the contexts as well...

[60] J.J.G.: That's right, exactly.

[61] C.P.: That is the question.

[62] J.J.G.: And also, it is not the corpus as such that is the problem. It is a question of context, as well as of more basic questions of analysis. Take transcription. We have as yet no generally agreed-upon, universally applicable system of transcription. Not even something like the international phonetic alphabet. And transcription, as recent work has shown, must always be related to analysis. For conversation, the so-called Gail Jefferson transcription system has come to be widely used throughout the world. But in my terms, it neglects communicatively significant prosodic and paralinguistic aspects of speech. It cannot, for example, account for the interpretive import of phonetic variability and so on.

There is also no agreement on methods of analysis. Quantitative methods are widely used, but in the absence of agreement on what is significant and countable, quantitative methods are limited in value. Therefore, I currently do not find it productive for the issues that concern me. There has to be a division of labour.

[63] C.P.: Sure. It's a problem I've found, too. When I have a number of cases before me, I am faced with a set of pairs of text and context. But this is much more than a corpus of texts only. Instead, when you have an electronic corpus, you have a set of utterances only, you can enumerate and so on...

[64] J.J.G.: There are quite sophisticated methods of computer-based scanning and retrieval that work on raw data. But we need 'agreement on what to look for and what the goals of the analysis are. Most discourse analysts work with lexicon and clause level grammar and are concerned with issues of structure.

[65] C.P.: Okay, it's possible to carry out all kinds of search procedures, but given this possibility, in your opinion, what's the sense of these procedures with regard to the problem of context?

[66] J.J.G.: Such analyses cannot account for the effect of context on interpretation. You always need a prior analysis of context. You need independent ethnographically-based analysis and information on the relationship between linguistic forms and discursive structures.

[67] **C.P.:** I think that as an analyst, an imperfect analyst, I always have to resist the temptation of omniscience and to try to reconstruct. But what does it mean to be an analyst, even if consciously not omniscient? It depends on the cues which are at your disposal.

[68] **J.J.G.:** You need more background information than you ordinarily have as an investigator who simply elicits and transcribes talk. This information is best collected through ethnographic observation and participation in everyday routines such as we relied on in the classroom interaction study I talked about at the beginning of this interview. It is also useful to make preliminary analyses and test one's assumptions about interpretive conventions through informal discussions of analysed texts along the lines of the procedures I discussed in *Discourse Strategies*. Ideally, such ethnographic procedures should accompany or precede large-scale text analyses.

[69] **C.P.:** So, can you have a corpus of contexts?

[70] **J.J.G.:** I don't know if I would use the term corpus here. There are ethnographic studies of communicative practices. Marco Jacquemet's book on the Naples Camorra trial<sup>10</sup> is such a study and should provide an analyst with at least some background information on discursive practices in the area of Naples. Another book in my Cambridge series, Linda Young's *Crosstalk and Culture in Sino-American Communication*,<sup>11</sup> is also very useful in showing how the Chinese frame their interactions.

[71] **C.P.:** But if you try to reconstruct, what kind of generalization can you reach? For instance, there is a very interesting example of yours quoted by Deborah Schiffrin in her book *Approaches to Discourse*,<sup>12</sup> the example of the teacher and the child. The child replies: "I don't know." This was a sort of cue, as if to say, "Please give me time."

[72] **J.J.G.:** "I don't know?"

[73] **C.P.:** "I don't know," in this sense, a sort of hesitation, conveying the wish to be encouraged. But the teacher took this kind of utterance as meaning: "I really have no knowledge concerning that."

[74] **J.J.G.:** Exactly, yes.

[75] **C.P.:** Okay, this is one case. You were able to reconstruct the dynamics of this case...

[76] **J.J.G.:** Only because I happened to have a graduate student with me who was familiar with the relevant conventions. But one or two instances are only sufficient for initial hypotheses. After that I had to go on to find other instances of the same phenomenon in order to construct a more general picture. That is the way ethnography works. It is a matter of observation, hypothesis formation, hypothesis testing on the basis of further information and then critiques from locals who are familiar with the situation, and so on.

<sup>10</sup> Jacquemet, M. 1996. *Credibility in Court: Communicative practices in the Camorra trials*. Cambridge: C.U.P.

<sup>11</sup> Young, L.W.L. 1994. *Crosstalk and Culture in Sino-American Communication*. Cambridge: C.U.P..

<sup>12</sup> Schiffrin, D. 1994. *Approaches to Discourse*. Oxford: Blackwell, p.100.

**[77] C.P.:** Yes. But how can I continue? For example, I have tried to examine a set of already published examples, already studied by other people.

**[78] J.J.G.:** That's very hard.

**[79] C.P.:** And the problem is that you can reach different conclusions, different hypotheses, even if you are still attached to the same presuppositions and assumptions, because you can attend to subsets of different cues within the same overall set of cues.

**[80] J.J.G.:** One solution is to have a local assistant who works with you on the analysis and who will tell you what it is in what he/she hears or perceives that leads to the interpretation. That gives you information at two levels, content and form. The more one works with such interpretive analyses, the more native-like one's interpretations can become.

**[81] C.P.:** But you can reach different conclusions, given the same inputs or cues. So I think that the enterprise of pragmaticians is a sort of game whose rules still have to be clarified.

**[82] J.J.G.:** It's only a game if you share the rules, otherwise it can't be a game. It's the kind of game ethnographers must learn to play. And many of them fail to do it. The trick is to learn to ask the right kind, i.e. productive, questions. Questions that lead to answers that give one the feeling that progress is being made even though many problems remain.

**[83] C.P.:** In your opinion, what kind of generalizations can we reach, starting from these cases? Because they are single cases.

**[84] J.J.G.:** Ultimately, large-scale quantitative studies are necessary. But current studies of this kind tend to work with many unexplicated assumptions. Good, valid ethnographic information can lead to more sophisticated and informative quantitative analyses. A basic problem in sociolinguistic research is how to define the domain of our analysis. In the case of standard languages like English or Italian, the problems are relatively minor. But how do we define what is or is not Romansch or Piedmontese, apart from basing our sampling on a geographically-bounded region? In discourse analyses of such genres as classroom lecturing, similar problems arise. Initially, students of classroom discourse simply asked teachers to lecture on specific topics and recorded what they did. Obviously, that kind of procedure raises problems about the generalizations one can derive from one's data. At the other extreme, some researchers simply turn on the machine and record everything that is said. This raises other analytical problems. All these are problems that can be avoided or at least clarified given basic background information and theoretical insights into how communicative practices work.

**[85] C.P.:** I think that you adopt a conception which is sociocognitive. Aren't you afraid of the mentalistic objection?

**[86] J.J.G.:** No, because my analyses are based on empirical and I hope replicable data. I talk about inferences, but these are grounded inferences, based, as I said before, on two sorts of data, at the level of form and at the level of content, as well as on background information on interpretive practices, and symbolic and indexical signs. If it can be empirically shown that the inferential

processes I postulate also hold true in other comparable contexts and are similarly grounded in verbal signs, I can make Boolean generalizations about relations between classes of objects. But I cannot make valid predictions about specific interpretations. Dialogue analysts are right. We are limited in some ways, but maybe not in the way they say we are.

[87] C.P.: Another question. What do you think about pragmatic creativity?

[88] J.J.G.: Pragmatic creativity has to refer to innovation in the context of certain constraints. It's akin to creativity in poetry or writing. Writers can be creative or crazy.

[89] C.P.: Craziness is maybe a kind of creativity.

[90] J.J.G.: We often assume that people are 'crazy' when we fail to see order or coherence of some kind in what they say or do. Creativity bends boundaries without violating our sense of order.

[91] C.P.: So, in your sense, pragmatic creativity can be a sort of violation of conventions?

[92] J.J.G.: Yes, it can be understood in terms of a broader set of conventions. These apparent violations can be understood in terms of our broader sense of order.

[93] C.P.: Okay, here I think Mr.Grice enters the scene...

[94] J.J.G.: Yes, given a broad interpretation of Gricean inference.

[95] C.P.: ...with violation and flouting. From your perspective, how is it possible for conversationalists and analysts facing some inputs, some cues and so on, to decide whether they are creative cues or not?

[96] J.J.G.: That always depends on your background and specific circumstances.

[97] C.P.: I see it is as the problem of the existence of unconventionality. You are always faced with conventions, maybe conventions coming from another set or system of conventions. You can take them as new things or violations, but in fact they belong to other sets of conventions. But consider someone who wants to be unconventional within the same community, that is, within a set of established conventions. In your opinion, what does it mean to be unconventional?

[98] J.J.G.: To do something that seems to violate one rule, but that can often be explained in terms of another, broader principle.

[99] C.P.: In your opinion, can we capture violation with procedures, with strategies?

[100] J.J.G.: Yes. Irony and humour, as Grice points out, often depend on such violations. I gave an example of irony in my article in Auer and Di Luzio's book, *The Contextualization of Language*.<sup>13</sup> Three graduate students are talking about why they chose the subjects they are studying and one of them, hearing that the other is going into engineering, exclaims, "We Asians." To me as an analyst, the utterance seemed strange and certainly not on topic. I only found out afterwards, when I inquired, that his reaction to his friend's statement was an ironic allusion

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<sup>13</sup> Gumperz, J.J. 1992. Contextualization revisited. In P. Auer & A. Di Luzio (eds.), *The Contextualization of Language*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, pp.39-53.

to a stereotype about Asians, who are aware of the so-called glass ceiling which keeps them from being promoted to important managerial positions and therefore prefer to stick to technical occupations. In a way, the graduate student was being creative in calling his fellows' attention to a problem they all face.

**[101] C.P.:** A last question. In your career, have you ever tried to describe a frame, a script or something like that?

**[102] J.J.G.:** Bateson likens framing in communication to framing in paintings. Goffman talks about how frames affect the way we perceive an interaction and how they change in the course of the interaction. For me framing is another way of talking about the activity level presuppositions that affect interpretations at any one point in an exchange. In my studies of South Asians living in England, I have shown that frequently they perceive and frame encounters quite differently from their native-speaking interlocutors. In one particularly striking case, an interviewee seemed quite unreasonably to be denying or contradicting information that the interviewer told him, even though only the interviewer had first-hand knowledge of the topic. It took us a long time to discover that the interviewee was simply pleading for sympathy or understanding. Based on these and a series of other miscommunications, I was able to argue that many South Asian speakers have ways of framing formal interview-like encounters which are quite different from those Westerners are familiar with. A frame, as I use the term, can be described as a class of related presuppositions that guide conduct in certain situations and that are directly related to choice of topic and verbal strategies. I gave an example of this in my paper in *Mutualities in Dialogue*<sup>14</sup> of which Foppa gave you a copy.

**[103] C.P.:** You said that Foppa asked you for a different version of your paper?

**[104] J.J.G.:** No, no. He asked me a question, one that I frequently hear: "How do you know if people understand each other? When do I know that my interpretation is the right one?" And I said, "Well, only through context do you have the right interpretation, and you'll reach an agreement, but only as the result of a dialogical process."

**[105] C.P.:** I am interested in the cognitive aspects of this process.

**[106] J.J.G.:** This is actually what I will talk about tomorrow.<sup>15</sup> I will take two examples. There's a rape case, a re-analysis of Paul Drew's example from a rape case, and I'll talk about some of the grammar that's involved there. I'll talk about what each person has to know in order to do what they're doing. And then I'll take my example from a job interview to show again that they did not share that knowledge, that therefore they couldn't understand, and the more they tried, the more things went wrong.

**[107] C.P.:** That's very interesting.

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<sup>14</sup> See footnote 6.

<sup>15</sup> Gumperz concluded the 1995 I.A.D.A. Round Table with a seminar on his recent work in Interactional Sociolinguistics (see Eerdmans, this volume).

[108] **A.D.L.:** The notion of genre does not seem very clear to me. Is it a metapragmatic category?

[109] **J.J.G.:** We use the term 'genre' to label, that is, to refer to people's modes of talking. In a way genre is similar to what some people call speech style. But genres are always associated with specific ideological values. As Hanks and others have pointed out, by using specific genres, we allude to the values that are associated with them.

[110] **A.D.L.:** Yes, that's what I thought.

[III] **J.J.G.:** But the only thing is that I talk from the specific standpoint of somebody who has either heard about it or analysed it, and I am aware of what other people think about it.

[112] **A.D.L.:** I understand it as a sort of art of organizing activity in a special way, as Luckmann says, to solve a communicative problem.

[113] **J.J.G.:** Yes, that's right. We organize activity to solve a communicative problem, but I would limit it. I would say that we do that in an activity, but genre is the way we talk about it, and the way it gets transmitted and passed on. And in fact I would say, when we talk about dialect, for example, Konstanz dialect versus Kreuzlinger dialect, we're making a judgement. That is, a judgement at the level of genre. And what I would argue is that any attempt to delineate the notion of dialect and style empirically, in terms of some kind of Saussurean or empirical analysis, is not going to be very successful. You don't need agreement on the linguistic facts of what a genre is, as long as there's some sharing of certain key elements that would be the prototypical judgements that we're making, not a systematic analysis, that's the point.