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Special Issue

In honour of John Gumperz

edited by
Peter Auer and Celia Roberts

Note

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Introduction—John Gumperz and the indexicality of language

PETER AUER and CELIA ROBERTS

1. Introduction

Many of the papers in this special issue were originally presented at a colloquium in honor of John Gumperz at the 16th Sociolinguistic Symposium (2006) in Limerick. Together with some specially commissioned papers, they are a celebration of John Gumperz's work over more than sixty years. As he nears his 90th birthday, they are a tribute from former students and those who have worked closely with him over the years and demonstrate the breadth of his influence on sociolinguistic studies. This influence stems, of course, from an outstanding intellect, but it also comes from his generosity of spirit, his delighted engagement in other people and their ideas, his warmth and humanity, and his enthusiasm to roll up his linguistic sleeves and drill down to the details of social problems. The two editors of this special issue have met him at different times and in different phases of their career and while they were engaged in different linguistic projects (CR working on intercultural communication and social problems in multiethnic urban Britain; PA on code switching among immigrants in Germany and later on prosody). Yet both have been influenced by him enormously, as have so many people in interactional (socio-)linguistics and linguistic anthropology, only few of which have had a chance to contribute to this issue. These introductory pages could be written in a very personal style, but as we know that John is not the sentimental kind, we will restrict ourselves to some few biographical remarks and a short outline of the most central aspects of what "interactional sociolinguistics" is all about,[1] and what we think John Gumperz's most central contribution to the investigation of social interaction has been.

Gumperz has now for a long time been acknowledged as one of the founders of sociolinguistics—together with Charles Ferguson, Joshua Fishman, William Labov, Basil Bernstein, Dell Hymes, and perhaps a few others. For instance, under the heading "History of sociolinguistics," the 2011 *SAGE Handbook of Sociolinguistics* devotes a whole chapter to him and "interactional sociolinguistics" (Gordon 2011). Whether he likes the place linguistic

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historiography has found for him we are not sure—there would be labels other than "sociolinguist" that might equally fit, such as "linguistic anthropologist," "discourse analyst," "ethnographer," etc. But social identities, as he has taught us, are constructions that cannot always be avoided. Surely, however, the theory of language as social practice which Gumperz developed from the 1970s onwards is intended to do more than laying the groundwork for a hyphenated linguistic subdiscipline devoted to the "social" as an addendum to the "linguistic." Rather, starting with communicative practices instead of structuralist systems, is for Gumperz an approach to *language as such*, an approach in which the central question is not how linguistic knowledge is structured in systematic ways, but in which the core notions are interpretation and understanding and how they are intertwined with the construction of shared common ground. While Gumperz's earlier work was indeed linked to the beginnings of sociolinguistics, and particularly the establishment of what became known as the "ethnography of communication," the later phase (what is generally referred to as "interactional sociolinguistics") reached out into the very heart of linguistics. It implies a strongly critical stance toward other influential schools of linguistic thinking. These, Gumperz argued, neglect linguistic diversity, multilingualism, etc., not because they are outside their field of interest, but because they are inherently inadequate to deal with them. As he and Jenny Cook-Gumperz (2005) put it in a recent paper:

> We contend (. . .) that to accept the structuralist view of grammar as reflecting the competence of ideal speakers living in hypothetical uniform communities is not only congenial to an innatist, biologized conception of language abilities, predetermined by the individual's neural or genetic makeup, but it also feeds into monoglot ideologies of language standardization. When these notions are applied to today's communicative ecologies, they are unable to account for the practices that speakers employ in pursuit of their day-to-day communicative goals. As a result, they have led to unrealistic, self-defeating, and potentially oppressive language and educational policies. (Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz 2005: 271)

These are strong and even angry words, which do not only accuse (some parts of) linguistics of being insensitive to social problems, but of being theoretically misleading and incapable of dealing with "languaging" in general. Gumperz has tried to do exactly the opposite: develop a theory of language (which for him means a theory of linguistic practice) that overcomes the shortcomings of structuralism and generative grammar.

2. Sixty years of linguistic research in four pages

Gumperz's anti-structuralist rigor was not there from the beginning, though; in fact he started as a devoted structuralist, and even in his 1995 discussion with

Prevignano and di Luzio (published as Prevignano and di Luzio 2003) he still conceded "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" (2003: 8). One of the most fascinating facets of Gumperz's work is therefore to observe how his thinking developed; the development is a coherent one in which one step links up with the preceding one, and adds one layer of theory on top of it; but in the end, the lower layers disappear almost entirely. It is perhaps for this reason that Gumperz never presented his theory as the ortho-doxa; even when he was already a well-established, central figure in linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics, he remained open to concurring and related, but also opposing and critical, voices, ready to concede that some of his earlier ideas had been insufficient or even wrong, and ready to remodel his approach. (Compare, for example, his discussion of the "speech community" in Gumperz [1968], a foundational and pervasively quoted article of the ethnography of communication, with the self-critical remarks on the same topic in Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz [2005], which deconstruct the very same notion under the impression of Susan Gal's and Judith Irvine's notion of ideology [Gal and Irvine 1995]; the same could be said of the notion "linguistic repertoire.") The hetero-doxa always came from himself, and what some might deplore as the absence of a grand theory established at a young age and then defended against all critiques, was for him a way of progressing. What is now considered the core of his approach to "interactional sociolinguistics," an approach to social interaction and social structure grounded in indexicality, only emerged in the late 1970s and 1980s, when Gumperz was already in his late fifties and sixties (not in the least influenced by H. P. Grice in his insistence on inference); and even after the publication of *Discourse Strategies* in 1982, the most concise formulation of his approach to language, it was continuously re-shaped and revised, taking in, among others, elements of Michael Silverstein's "orders of indexicality," Asif Agha's "enregisterment," John Lucy's and Stephen Levinson's defense of linguistic relativism, etc.

So the itinerary was a long one, intellectually, but also empirically. It was linked to a multitude of research sites in Asia, Europe, and North America, and crossed disciplinary boundaries frequently. Gumperz's 1954 Ph.D. thesis was in German linguistics, a description and analysis of the dialect(s) of a Swabian immigrant community in Washtenaw County, Michigan. It is deeply rooted in American structuralism, and was presumably written more under the influence of Kenneth Pike than Hans Kurath or Herbert Penzl, his Germanist supervisor in Michigan. (Swabian, incidentally, was not Gumperz's native tongue: he was born in Hattingen in the German *Ruhrgebiet*.) His structuralist phase was not yet over when, in the following years, John Gumperz embarked on his "Indian phase": now employed at Cornell University, he spent two years with

a multidisciplinary project group investigating socioeconomic developments in a north Indian village, and in the years to follow, he was to return to India for further stays, inter alia as a visiting scholar at Pune. Up to about 1970, he published a long list of books and articles on the languages of India, among them, particularly in the beginning, structuralist analyses of several languages, mostly their phonology, but more and more shifting to the emerging field of sociolinguistics. The diversity of the language situation in India, the high amount of multilingualism visible in pervasive code switching, the inadequacy of geographical explanations, and the social embedding of this diversity posed a whole array of new questions for which theoretical answers had to be found but were not easily discovered in linguistics as it was at the time. Among the numerous published results of this phase is the volume *Linguistic Diversity in South Asia* (with Charles Ferguson, 1960), but also the early theoretical papers—on speech communities, linguistic repertoires, code switching, and language convergence—appeared in this phase (many published again in Dil 1971).

In the early 1960s, Gumperz joined the Anthropology Department at the University of Berkeley, where he became full professor in 1965. He now widened his empirical scope by smaller field trips, to Norway (in 1964 he had been invited to Oslo and met Bergen anthropologist Jan-Petter Blom, with whom he spent the summer doing ethnographic research in the little town of Hemnesberget, which was to become one of the most famous sociolinguistic research sites); to Corinthia, where he worked on language contact between German and Slovenian; to Yugoslavia; again to (Central) India (he was chairman of the Center for South and South East Asia Studies in Berkeley), among others. However, Gumperz also now became an urban linguistic anthropologist who turned to linguistic diversity in North America. He shortly (and not very successfully) cooperated with Joshua Fishman on his famous project "Bilingualism in the barrio" and started his own project, "Bilingualism and ethnic boundaries," at the Berkeley Institute of International Studies, in which he investigated the linguistic and cultural situation of Mexican immigrants, including their classroom interactions—the beginnings of a life-long interest in educational linguistics.

The 1960s surely were an exciting time in Berkeley, also in linguistics and anthropology. Many things happened at a breathtaking speed. Gumperz was one of the members of the Language Behavior Research Laboratory, which combined sociolinguistics (Susan Ervin-Tripp), psycholinguistics (Dan Slobin), and anthropology. In 1967, the three of them were the main authors of the influential *Field Manual for Cross-Cultural Study of the Acquisition of Communicative Competence*, which for the first time brought intercultural communication into focus (cf. Slobin 1967). But this was also the time when Harold Garfinkel and Erving Goffman published their most important books and papers and had an important influence on Gumperz ("I'm a little bit between Garfinkel and Goffman," he says in 1995 [Prevignano and di Luzio 2003: 19]), and when conversation analysis started to develop a rigorous method of sequential analysis. (Gumperz was to embrace this method only half-heartedly, having always been convinced that sequential analysis and "next turn proof procedures" cannot exhaust the interpretive processes which are the basis of understanding in interaction.) But above all, the early 1960s were the time of Gumperz's cooperation with Dell Hymes; the two edited two pace-setting volumes: *The Ethnography of Communication* (1964) and *Directions in Sociolinguistics: The Ethnography of Communication* (1972). It was here that the ethnography of communication was developed from Gumperz's field-based studies in linguistics and Dell Hymes's work on Native American myth. Their crucial insight was to take the speech event as the unit of analysis rather than community-wide linguistic and cultural norms, to see that culture did not stand outside talk but was constituted in and through situated speaking practices.

In the course of the 1970s, Gumperz went considerably beyond that. He developed the theory of inferencing and contextualization which was fully formulated in his 1982 book, but is foreshadowed in several earlier papers, perhaps most importantly in the 1974 working paper "The sociolinguistics of interpersonal communication," published by the Centro internazionale di Semiotica e di Linguistica at Urbino (even though, in 1995, Gumperz modestly says of it that he "didn't have the theory then"). This paper already uses the term "contextualization" and presents the famous "I'ma git me a gig" example to argue that non-Saussurian, non-denotational linguistic signs can generate conversational meaning. This is the beginning of work at a different kind of linguistics, which Gumperz recently often called "Peircean" (as opposed to Saussurian).

The transition into the new theory can be observed by looking at Gumperz's several papers on code switching, a topic he returned to again and again over several decades. He had already published on structural aspects of code switching in India in the mid-1960s (cf. Gumperz 1964); in the 1970s (e.g., in Gumperz and Hernández Chavez 1975 [first published in 1968], Gumperz and Herasimchuk 1972, and Gumperz 1976 [the basis of chapter 4 in the 1982 book]), the focus widens to the conversational functions of code switching which are seen in the context of the interaction's sequential development, the activity type in which it is embedding, and the prosodic shape it takes. But the most influential and most acclaimed publication on code switching doubtlessly is Blom and Gumperz's paper on code switching between dialect and standard in Hemnesberget (already written in the mid-1960s but published in a generally available form in 1972). Although perhaps surprising, as code switching is not a central feature of the Norwegian language situation, the paper was extremely successful, perhaps also because it demonstrated a methodology which

was to become the hallmark of Gumperz's approach: the combination of ethnographic method, including network analysis (perhaps due to Blom's influence),[2] interactional analysis, and the elicitation of members' attitudes and ideologies. The central distinction between metaphorical and situational code switching was an important step since it made it clear that linguistic behavior is not only a simple reflection of social structure but rather actively construes situational and social contexts.

From the 1980s onward, as micro discourse analysis and conversational analysis put the magnifying glass on speakers' performance, Gumperz produced new insights into how sociocultural knowledge enters into the ongoing negotiation of meaning between speakers. Exploring the link between background knowledge and the interactional moment became a central element in the approach. Gumperz in this time also returned to the topic of dialect/standard variation during several extended stays in Germany (mainly in Konstanz and Mannheim), where he cooperated, among others, with the Institut für Deutsche Sprache, and worked with Aldo di Luzio, Susanne Günthner and the first author on bilingualism and intercultural communication, and discourse genres. At the Institut für Deutsche Sprache, Werner Kallmeyer at that time ran the largest ethnographic research project in German linguistics ever which resulted in the monumental volume *Kommunikation in der Stadt,* to which Gumperz also contributed (cf. Kallmeyer 1994).

Another field of research that became more and more important for Gumperz at that time was intercultural communication. This resulted naturally from the fact that interactional sociolinguistics connects the theoretical development of context in interaction and discourse coherence with large social problems of racial and ethnic inequality, which Gumperz often located empirically in the way in which institutions organize gate-keeping situations. His cooperation with the second author of this introduction in London (Gumperz, Jupp, and Roberts 1979, 1980; also cf. Collins [in this issue]) resulted in the enormously influential BBC production *Crosstalk* in which he functioned as a scientific consultant; Gumperz showed how miscommunication can result from conflicting expectations and non-denotational contextualization conventions. The upshot was that negative social evaluation of speakers in high-stakes encounters does not occur because these events are intercultural per se but because aspects of speaker style and content are noticed as culturally different (Auer and Kern 2001). How differences of interpretation become social judgments is at the center of Gumperz's theories of conversational inference and contextualization and has been on the agenda of his research ever since (cf. Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz 2007).

More recently, as Emeritus Professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara, Gumperz has re-interpreted intercultural communication in terms of late modern societies where diversity and mobility contribute to new definitions of the self and in which intercultural communication is not the exception but the rule. Here, "the primary issue is not intercultural communication between groups but the identity and style shifting of individuals" (Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz 2008).

3. Interactional sociolinguistics

As we have outlined above, interactional sociolinguistics (IS) draws on the ethnography of communication, ethnomethodology and conversation analysis, and Goffman's "interaction order" (Gumperz 1999). But there are distinctive qualities to IS which develop or contrast with these other traditions: the focus on diversity within interaction; the thematization of inference and so contextualization; and the centrality of social outcomes and not just social order.

3.1. *Diversity within interaction*

Gumperz's early dialect work in India and Norway gave him a sociolinguistic habitus which led him to challenge the assumptions in other interactional studies that there is an agreed rational shared base to managing interaction. One of his key perceptions was that shared conditions for understanding cannot be taken for granted in linguistically and culturally diverse societies, and that it is the analyst's task to discover the extent to which speakers in any interaction share communicative resources (Gumperz 1982a, 1999: 458). His research in Berkeley and in London in the 1970s and 1980s was based on key research sites, usually in asymmetrical institutional settings where differences in communicative resources or style led to negative social evaluation of the minority ethnic speaker (Gumperz 1982b). Gumperz argued that there is a communicative dimension to discrimination. Racial inequality is not simply the product of prejudice but arises from the complex inter-relationship of values and ideology brought into the encounter and the ways in which participants make sense to each other (or not) within it. IS highlights the small and unnoticed ways in which the grounds for mutual negotiation of meaning are not shared. But it would be quite wrong to see such approaches as a simple reading off of general cultural differences in interaction. The picture is a much more complex and subtle one, as Gumperz argues. Shared inferential practices are not the result of simply belonging to a particular ethnic group or community but are the result of participation in "networks of relationships" which socialize individuals into similar communicative practices: "It is long-term exposure to similar communicative experience in institutionalised networks of relationships and not language or community membership as such that lies at the root of shared culture and shared inferential practices" (Gumperz 1997: 15).

3.2. *Inference and contextualization*

Gumperz developed Garfinkel's "et cetera principle"—that as we talk and listen we are continuously filling in all that is unsaid but necessary for sense making—into a theory of conversational inference. We make sense of what we hear by continually looking for relevance. We do this at the most micro level, connecting up small signs to "scenarios" or hypotheses. These are always suggestive and tentative and this has implications for the analyst as well as the interactants. In shifting from a general notion of background knowledge to a focus on how interpretive processes actually work, Gumperz, with Jenny Cook-Gumperz, reworked the taken-for-granted notion of context into the robust concept of contextualization (Cook-Gumperz and Gumperz 1976).

"Contextualization" acts in two ways. Firstly, it focuses the analyst on the search for relevance, both in the literal interpretation of talk and also in what is out there or beyond the literal in language—the indexical and metaphorical functions of language, that which is outside and above what is actually heard. Secondly, it has a reflexive function in which grammar/lexicon and prosody/style/gesture, etc., invoke contexts which shape the interaction moment by moment in the very act of being shaped by it. Gumperz's notion of metaphorical code switching (Blom and Gumperz 1972) was the first example of his focus on the detailed sign systems that do the contextualizing work, invoking identities, relationships, shared scenarios, and a particular emotional key in the lightest of touches (see Jacquemet and Collins [in this issue] on indexicality). "Contextualization cues," the detailed sign systems through which contexts are created, channel the inferential process. These surface features function metapragmatically in that they cue: ". . . what is to be expected in the exchange, what should be lexically expressed, what can be conveyed only indirectly, how moves are to be positioned in an exchange, what interpersonal relations are involved and what rights to speaking apply" (Gumperz 1996: 396–397). Importantly, there is another dimension: the inferences contextualization calls up do not rely on overt words and contextualization cues alone but are embedded in and reach out to wider social and political scenarios and ideologies.

The emphasis on the prosodic and paralinguistic features of contextualization, as well as code switching, highlights Gumperz's insights that these cues are not subject to conscious control or awareness, so their function in channeling meaning and guiding the social relationships and climate go largely unnoticed. Yet their very multi-functionality makes them powerful but largely hidden triggers for making judgments about the competence and adequacy of speakers. These are the invisible contributions to negative ethnic stereotyping and indirect discrimination. It should also be mentioned here that Gumperz's methodology included "multimodality" many decades before it became fashionable: visual behavior provides some of the most effective contextualizing features (cf. Auer 1992). In this sense, the borderline between linguistic contextualization cues (such as prosody or code selection) and meaningful body behavior becomes permeable.

3.3. *Social outcomes*

While Gumperz's theories have played an important contribution to our understanding of the social order in societies characterized by diversity, they are also notable for their impact on social outcomes. They not only have practical relevance, they do practical things. And this is because of his insistence on linking the cumulative effects of everyday interactions to large-scale social outcomes. As Levinson (1997: 24) says of Gumperz: ". . . it is the large-scale sociological effects of multitudes of small-scale interactions that still partially fuels his preoccupations with conversation, most evident perhaps in his concern with the plight of the individual caught up in these large-scale forces." His moral and political commitment to demonstrating "the small tragedies" (Levinson 1997) of failed interviews or access to scarce resources denied has led to practical interventions, such as a series of BBC programs including *Crosstalk*, and a legacy passed on to many of his former students and associates to challenge the received thinking about the role of communication in evaluating dominated groups. His crucial understanding that there is a communicative dimension to discrimination contributed, in the 1980s and 1990s, both to the social debate on and practical action to address persistent racial and ethnic inequality.

3.4. *Innovative method*

John Gumperz recognized that the focus on inferential processes created a problem for the analyst as much as for interactants themselves since there is an inherent ambiguity in coming to a plausible shared interpretation of a situation. He developed the notion of "communicative ecology" at two levels to disambiguate speaker intention as far as it is possible. Firstly, he argues for an ethnographic phase in which the researcher lurks and soaks and questions within a particular environment in order to understand how and why encounters take place and how local actors manage them. Gathering ethnographic information from participants is a method developed early on from Gumperz's fieldwork and has remained one of the signature methods of IS.

This grasp of the communicative ecology is then used in the detailed analysis of video and audio-recorded data. Here the notion of communicative ecology is used at a micro level to examine how contextualization cues work reflexively to build and change the interaction. Rather than looking for patterns across multiple examples of the same practice, as conversation analysts do, IS

examines the whole of an interaction as a case. It then chunks it into units bounded by organizational content and those contextualization cues which the early ethnographic phase has highlighted as particularly relied upon to shift interpretive frames and negotiate meaning. Only later and more cautiously can any comparison across events be made.

Gumperz's work has also made an important contribution to the process of transcription. Drawing on Hallidayan theories of intonation and later on conversation analysis conventions, he has developed a system which marks the subtle prosodic, paralinguistic, and other nonverbal features of interaction which capture the contextualization cues that do much to determine shared interpretation (or not) (Gumperz and Berenz 1993). In this insistence on nonsegmental information, his way of transcribing is clearly different from classical work in CA, and is akin to more recent transcription systems such as GAT (cf. Selting et al. 1998, 2010).

4. John Gumperz's legacy

Perhaps the most fitting tribute to John Gumperz's work comes from a roll call of researchers who have used and developed his approach to establish new subfields in a sociolinguistics of globalization. The papers in this special issue are part of this new sociolinguistics but there are also many, many other scholars whose work is directly influenced by him and who are forging new theoretical studies grounded in the empirical realities of their own sociopolitical contexts; for example, in relating language and multilingualism to the new political economy (e.g., Heller 2003), in exploring language crossing and stylization as acts of identity (e.g., Rampton 1999, 2006), in educational linguistics (Green 1992), in nexus analysis (Scollon and Wong Scollon 2004) and investigating communicative ecologies in ethnographic studies of neighborhoods (Blommaert, Collins, and Slembrouck 2005), as well as the long list of contributors to the Cambridge University Press series *Studies in Interactional Sociolinguistics,* of which John was the founder editor, to name but a few. In a way, John Gumperz was the first to develop a kind of "social linguistics" which is able to deal with the challenges of language in late modernity, in an age of "globalization" whose "superdiversity" (Vertoveç 2007) has been on the agenda for him for many decades. It is hardly imaginable that a sociolinguistics of globalization should be possible in the future without relying on his insights.

Notes

1. See also Dil (1971), di Luzio (2003), and the bibliography in Eerdmans et al. (2003), as well as Gordon (2011).

2. Cf. interview with J. Blom on http://www.antropologi.org/index.php?o=60&e=160&mid=168 (retrieved 28 March 2011).

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