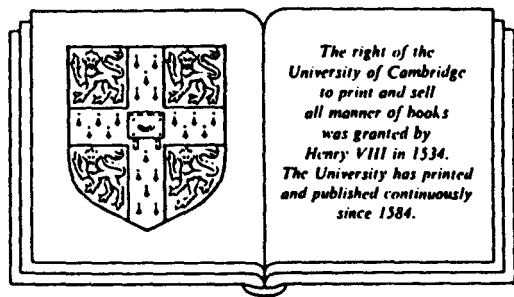# Linguistics: The Cambridge Survey

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12 Ethnography of speaking: toward a linguistics of the praxis*

Alessandro Duranti

2.0. Introduction

The ethnography of speaking (henceforth ES) studies language use as displayed in the daily life of particular speech communities. Its method is ethnography, supplemented by techniques developed in other areas of study such as developmental pragmatics, conversation analysis, poetics, and history.[1] Its theoretical contributions are centered around the study of *situated discourse*, that is, linguistic performance as the locus of the relationship between language and the socio-cultural order.[2]

From the point of view of the *content* of daily verbal interaction, ES is interested in the relationship between language use and local systems of knowledge and social conduct. ES views discourse as one of the main loci for the (re)creation and transmission of cultural patterns of knowledge and social action. More specifically, ES studies what is accomplished through speaking and how speech is related to and is constructed by particular aspects of social organization and speakers' assumptions, values, and beliefs about the world. The meaning of speech for particular speakers in specific social activities is thus a central concern for ES. Some typical questions asked by ethnographers of speaking in analyzing a particular strip of verbal interaction are: what is the goal of speech in this case? Which attributes of the linguistic code warrant its use in this context? What is the relation of this interaction to other, similar acts performed by the same actors or to other events observed in the same community?

With respect to the *form* of daily language use, ES has been focussing on

[1] See, for instance, Bauman 1977; Shenkein 1978; Ochs & Schieffelin 1979; Hymes 1981; Bauman 1983; Heath 1983.

[2] For a general discussion and overview of the ethnographic approach to the study of language use, see Hymes 1974; Bauman & Sherzer 1975; Coulthard 1977: Chapter 3; Sherzer 1977; Hymes 1982b; Saville-Troike 1982; Sherzer 1983: 11–20; Duranti 1985.

patterns of variation across socio-cultural contexts, both within and across societies, with particular emphasis on the interrelation of the emergent and the culturally predictable structure of verbal performance in the conduct of social life.

The question often arises, whether explicitly or not, as to the relationship between ES and the supposedly wider area of sociolinguistics.

If we understand sociolinguistics as the systematic study of language use in social life, there should then be no doubts that ES should be considered a subfield of sociolinguistics. Such an inclusion of ES within the larger spectrum of sociolinguistic research could only benefit ES, which has often been criticized for its limited typology of actually analyzed linguistic phenomena (e.g. too much emphasis on ritualized speech or formal events) (Bloch 1976) and for its lack of concern for more explicit indications about its relevance for other branches of linguistics and anthropology (Leach 1976).

There are, however, peculiarities both in the methods and in the very object of inquiry of ES that make it related to, but distinct from, much of sociolinguistic research. Such differences, both at the methodological and at the theoretical level, accompanied by an abundance of new and stimulating research in some of the areas comprised by Hymes's notion of *communicative competence* (see below), have made more and more apparent the need to keep expanding the range of data and theoretical discussion within the ES approach before merging it with other fields of inquiry.

12.1. Language use

Like sociolinguists in general, ethnographers of speaking are interested in language *use*. A distinction must be drawn, however, between the commonly accepted sense of this term within linguistics at large and that meant by ES. Formal grammarians, historians of linguistics, and even sociolinguists at times interpret 'language use' in a narrow sense, namely as the actual employment of particular utterances, words, or sound by particular speakers at a given time and place, as linguistic 'tokens,' in other words, as opposed to 'types' (Lyons 1972). *Use* is thus often identified with *parole* as opposed to *langue* (cf. Saussure 1916). The sociolinguist's goal is thus to infer patterns of variation on the basis of the systematic sampling of more or less controlled 'uses' (or *actes de parole*). This notion of language use is strictly related to the view of sociolinguistics as merely a different *methodology*, a different way of obtaining data from that usually practiced by formal grammarians (Labov 1972: 259). In this view, the sociolinguist is depicted as someone who refuses to accept or test linguistic intuitions and prefers to them a tape-recorder with which to gather data from actual speech. Although formal grammarians have accepted the *social* significance

of sociolinguistic research, many of them are still unable to see its signifi-
cance from the point of view of *grammatical theory* (Chomsky 1977: 55).[3]
What is missing here is both the realization by the formal grammarians, and
the ability to convince by the sociolinguists, that mere structural descrip-
tions of linguistic forms are useful and interesting but consistently lacking
some essential feature of what makes language so precious to the human
species, namely, its ability to function *in context* as an instrument of both
reflection and action upon the world. So-called 'cognitive models' rely on
the assumption that it is possible – and in fact mandatory in order to have a
theory – to account for human behavior by means of context-independent
rules. But we know now that decontextualized features pick out objects and
provide analyses that are qualitatively different from those handled by
social actors (Bourdieu 1977; Dreyfus 1983; Dreyfus & Dreyfus 1986). The
use of 'intuitions' in linguistic as well as in metalinguistic behavior can be
seen as an individual ability to rely upon or reconstruct (intrapsychologi-
cally) contextual information.

Thus, for ethnographers of speaking, as well as for many other research-
ers in the social sciences, *language use* must be interpreted as *the use of the
linguistic code(s) in the conduct of social life*. ES accepts Wittgenstein's
(1958) claim that the unity of '(a) language' is an illusion and one should
rather look at specific contexts of use (or 'language games') in order to
explain how linguistic signs can do the work they do. The interaction
between speech and social action is so important that the methodologies and
notations developed to study the referential (or denotational) uses of speech
may be inadequate to study its *social* uses (Silverstein 1977, 1979). The term
speaking was introduced by Hymes to stress the active, praxis-oriented
aspect of the linguistic code, as opposed to the more contemplative, static
notion of 'language' as seen and described by structural (synchronic) ling-
uistics. Speaking must thus be thought of as a form of *human labor*, the
phylogenetically and ontogenetically most powerful form of cooperative
behavior (Vygotsky 1978; Leontyev 1981; Rossi-Landi 1983).

The concern with language use is thus not only a methodological com-
mitment toward getting what speakers *really* say in a variety of contexts but
also a consequence of the interest in what speakers *do* with language,
whether willingly or unwillingly, consciously or unconsciously, directly or
obliquely. In particular, ethnographers of speaking have been concerned

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[3] For Chomsky, to 'incorporate nonlinguistic factors into grammar: beliefs, attitudes, etc.' would
amount 'to a rejection of the initial idealization of language, as an object of study'; it would mean that
'language is a chaos that is not worth studying' (Chomsky 1977: 152–3). This attitude has produced a
culturally extremely impoverished object of inquiry ('core grammar'). To think that such an 'object'
bears some relationship to 'language' is an interesting and provoking hypothesis, but to give it the
theoretical status of a phylogenetically defined organ and claim that it is the only object worth of study
still seems, to many of us, at least unwarranted by the data.

with the work done by and through language in (1) establishing, challenging, and recreating social identities and social relationships, (2) explaining to others as well as to ourselves why the world is the way it is and what could or should be done to change it; (3) providing frames for events at the societal as well as individual level; (4) breaking, or more often sustaining, physical, political, and cultural barriers. Some of these areas of inquiry have also been studied within *pragmatics* (Gazdar 1979; Levinson 1983). What usually distinguishes the ethnographic approach from pragmatic analysis is a stronger concern for the socio-cultural context of the use of language, with the specific relationship between language and local systems of knowledge and social order, and a lesser commitment to the relevance of logical notation to the strategic use of speech in social interaction.

12.2. Communicative competence

The ethnographic study of language use aims at describing the knowledge that participants in verbal interaction need and display in order to communicate successfully with one another. *Communicative competence* is the term Hymes (1972b) used for this kind of complex expertise, which includes but goes beyond Chomsky's (1965) *competence* (Hymes 1982b).

> We have . . . to account for the fact that a normal child acquires
> knowledge of sentences, not only as grammatical, but also as
> appropriate. He or she acquires competence as to when to speak,
> when not, and as to what to talk about with whom, when, where, in
> what manner. In short, a child becomes able to accomplish a
> repertoire of speech acts, to take part in speech events, and to
> evaluate their accomplishment by others. This competence,
> moreover, is integral with attitudes, values, and motivations
> concerning language, its features and uses, and integral with
> competence for, and attitudes toward, the interrelation of language,
> with the other codes of communicative conduct.
>
> (Hymes 1972b: 277–8)

Within ES and sociolinguistics, the discussion of communicative competence versus linguistic (or grammatical) competence usually centers around two issues: (1) the need to accompany grammatical description with conditions of appropriateness; (2) the complementarity of the grammatical (or linguistic) code with other aspects of cooccurring rule-governed behavior (e.g. gestures, eye-gaze) (Hymes 1982b).

In fact, a crucial difference between Chomsky's notion of *competence* and Hymes's notion is that the former relies on the assumption that knowledge can be studied separately from performance, meant as the implementation of

that knowledge in language use, whereas for Hymes, participation, performance, and intersubjective knowledge are all essential features of the ability to 'know a language.' Furthermore, Chomsky presents the hypothesis of autonomous grammar as a prerequisite to maintaining 'order' in the object of study (see note 3). The very possibility of 'doing science' on linguistic phenomena is tied to the researchers' ability to construct hypotheses about linguistic forms without having to make reference to nonlinguistic factors such as beliefs and attitudes (Chomsky 1977).

But the assumption that grammar of an idealized language is necessarily *orderly*, whereas patterns of actual verbal communication are *chaotic*, can hardly be supported by empirical investigation. Anyone who has ever engaged in grammatical analysis of the 'idealized' sort knows that disagreement among speakers on sentence acceptability is common; and anyone who has ever read any study on linguistic variation and linguistic performance knows that there are a lot of people out there finding 'order' in the apparent 'chaos' of language use. Although these are not sufficient reasons either for rejecting the use of introspection and idealization or for claiming full understanding of linguistic performance, they are arguments in favor of wanting to keep under a common roof – the notion of *communicative competence*, that is – the variety of phenomena that speakers must be able to handle in order to be considered 'competent.'

We all know that a large part of the work done by Chomsky and his students is based on their ability to find (i.e. imagine) appropriate contexts for the uttering of certain utterance-types. Despite the theoretical assumption of the innateness of certain aspects of grammar as pure cognitive/ biological endowment, the actual definition of such aspects rests on the possibility of matching sentences with possible worlds, which are, in turn, constructed on the basis of the experience linguists have of the world in which they live. Criticism of such a methodology by ES and other approaches is not a rejection of abstraction or idealization, but rather a fundamental skepticism about the uncritical use of what phenomenological sociology calls 'preunderstanding' of the world (Garfinkel 1967; Bleicher 1982). In the case of linguistic research, it is the preunderstanding of the relationship between linguistic and nonlinguistic behavior that is usually ignored by formal grammarians. The same criticism drawn by Husserl toward objectivism in psychology applies here:

> The psychologists simply fail to see that they too [like physicists] study neither themselves nor the scientists who are doing the investigating nor their own vital environing world [*Umwelt*]. They do not see that from the very beginning they necessarily presuppose

themselves as a group of men belonging to their own environing world
and historical period.   (Husserl 1965: 186–7)

Within ES, the explicit discussion of the relationship between the
researchers' expectations and norms and the system they try to describe has
become a major concern for the study of language acquisition and socializa-
tion. Ochs & Schieffelin (1984) have taken 'the descriptions of caregiving in
the psychological literature as ethnographic descriptions' (1984: 283) and
compared them with other accounts provided by members of other societies
on how children acquire language and develop into competent members of
their society. What is taken for granted by linguists and psychologists describ-
ing language development to other members of their own society is thus
unveiled by a process of estrangement:

> using an ethnographic perspective, we will recast selected behaviors of
> white middle-class caregivers and young children as pieces of one
> 'developmental story.' The white middle-class developmental story
> . . . will be compared with two other developmental stories from
> societies that are strikingly different: Kaluli (Papua New Guinea) and
> Western Samoan.   (Ochs & Schieffelin 1984: 285)

The result is a new discussion of the relationship between the process of
acquiring language and the process of becoming a competent member of a
society. An understanding of the ways in which the two processes are
interwoven provides the necessary perspective for assessing the relevance of
local theories of self and of knowledge for members' linguistic behavior on
the one hand and our description of it on the other.

Ultimately, any attempt at relating linguistic forms to their *content*
depends on the ability that both members and researchers have to utilize the
context of speech as a resource for achieving understanding and getting things
done.

2.3. Context

In formal linguistic analysis, context is usually brought in when difficulties or
doubts arise with respect to the interpretation or acceptability of certain
linguistic expressions. Although context is in fact crucial for imagining poss-
ible alternative interpretations of structurally ambiguous sentences, its use
and role are not officially recognized in formal models of linguistic com-
petence. The ethnographer's job, on the other hand, crucially relies on the
ability skilfully and explicitly to relate patterns of behavior, speech included,

to their immediate as well as broader sociocultural context. It is not by accident then that it was Malinowski, the father of modern ethnography, who first stressed the need to interpret speech in its *context of situation*, 'an expression which indicates on the one hand that the conception of *context* has to be broadened and on the other that the *situation* in which words are uttered can never be passed over as irrelevant to the linguistic expression' (1923: 306).

Although Malinowski originally thought that the need to keep speech and context tied to one another was restricted to the study of 'primitive people,' for whom language 'is a mode of action and not an instrument of reflection' (1923: 312), he later reformulated his views to include the importance of context in the interpretation of all languages, across all kinds of uses, literacy included (Malinowski 1935, Vol. 2: Part iv):[4]

> Our definition of meaning forces us to a new, a richer and wider type of observation. In order to show the meaning of words we must not merely give sound of utterance and equivalence of significance. We must above all give the pragmatic context in which they are uttered, the correlation of sound to context, to action and to technical apparatus; and incidentally, in a full linguistic description, it would be necessary also to show the types of drills or conditioning or education by which words acquire meaning. (1935, Vol. 2: 60)

Behavioristic tones aside, this passage expresses concerns and assumptions that were, thirty years later, at the heart of Hymes's call for an *ethnography of speaking* (Hymes 1964a, b).

In the last twenty years or so the term *context* has been broken down and variedly redefined to include the range of actual or potential speakers, the spatio-temporal dimensions of the interaction, the participants' goals. Three notions have been adopted and discussed within ES and related approaches: *speech community*, *speech event*, *speech act*.

2.3.1. Speech community

The widest context of verbal interaction for ES as well as for sociolinguistic research is usually taken to be the *speech community*, defined as a group of people who share the rules for interpreting and using at least one language

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[4] Here is the official statement that sanctions Malinowski's 'turn': 'in one of my previous writings, I opposed civilised and scientific to primitive speech, and argued as if the theoretical uses of words in modern philosophic and scientific writing were completely detached from their pragmatic sources. This was an error, and a serious error at that. Between the savage use of words and the most abstract and theoretical one there is only a difference of degree. Ultimately all the meaning of all words is derived from bodily (sic!) experience' (Malinowski 1935, Vol. 2: 58).

(Gumperz 1972: 16) or linguistic variety (Hymes 1972a: 54). One of the reasons for taking the speech community as the starting point for linguistic research was to avoid the assumption that the sharing of the same 'language' implies shared understanding of its use and meaning in various contexts (Hymes 1972a, b).

It has been shown that the notion of speech community should not be simply equated with linguistic homogeneity of a well-defined set of features (Hudson 1980; Hymes 1982b). In the Norwegian community studied by Blom and Gumperz (1972), for instance, individual speakers who were born and raised in the community exhibited fundamental differences in terms of the uses of code-switching, of its interpretation and its value. One way of accounting for such diversity is to claim that it is characteristic of the very use of linguistic communication in social life:

> When studied in sufficient detail, with field methods designed to elicit speech in significant contexts, all speech communities are linguistically diverse and it can be shown that this diversity serves important communicative functions in signaling interspeaker attitudes and in providing information about speakers' social identities.
>
> (Gumperz 1972: 13)

Another way to deal with the kind of diversity documented by Gumperz and others is to propose that in fact speech communities do not exist except as 'prototypes' in people's minds (Hudson 1980: 30). To test such a hypothesis, it would be necessary to show that there is a psychological reality of some prototypical or 'ideal' core features of language use within a certain group of people. Some of Labov's (1972) findings on the uniformity of overt types of evaluative behavior could be used in such an argument. At the same time, his detailed work on *patterns* of variation in phonological and lexical domains points to a different, if not opposite, hypothesis, namely, the idea that the 'types' or regularities to be found are not in anyone's head but rather somewhere *out there*, in the (real) world of performance.

Any notion of speech community (and this would be also true for defining 'dialect' or 'vernacular') will thus depend on two sets of phenomena: (1) patterns of variation in a group of speakers also definable on grounds other than linguistic homogeneity (e.g. speakers of this town tend to drop post-vocalic /r/ in the following contexts) and (2) emergent and cooperatively achieved aspects of human behavior as strategies for establishing comembership in the conduct of social life. The ability to explain (1) ultimately relies on our success in understanding (2).

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12.3.2. Speech event

In contrast to sociolinguists, researchers in ES tend to start their analyses of speech behavior from the loci of use of speech rather than from the surveying of a particular set of norms for a particular range of social actors. The notion of *speech event* is the analytical tool for such a research program. The basic assumption of a speech-event analysis of language use is that an understanding of the form and content of everyday talk in its various manifestations implies an understanding of the social activities in which speaking takes place (Hymes 1964a, 1972a; Levinson 1979; Duranti 1985). Such activities, however, are not simply 'accompanied' by verbal interaction, they are also *shaped* by it: there are many ways, that is, in which speech has a role in the constitution of a social event. The most obvious cases are perhaps gossip sessions and telephone conversations, neither of which could take place if talk were not exchanged. But even the most physically oriented activities such as sport events or hunting expeditions rely heavily on verbal communication for the participants' successful coordination around some common task.

How is one to face the formidable task of isolating and describing event-units? Hymes (1964a) proposed a preliminary list of features or components of communicative events. The idea was to provide 'a useful guide in terms of which relevant features can be discerned – a provisional phonetics, as it were, not an *a priori* phonemics, of the communicative event' (Hymes 1964a: 13). The first list was later extended to include 16 components, grouped under 8 main entries, to be remembered with the acronym SPEAKING (Hymes 1972a): S (situation: setting and scene); P (participants: speaker/sender, addressor, hearer/receiver/audience, addressee); E (ends: outcomes, goals); A (act sequence: message form and message content); K (key); I (instrumentalities: channel, forms of speech); N (norms: norms of interaction and interpretation); G (genres). (See also Saville-Troike 1982; Duranti 1985).

In the last ten years or so, the speech-event unit has become a useful tool for the analysis of language use within and across societies. Many of the most recent contributions to the understanding of the constitutive role of speaking in political arenas, child-rearing practices, literacy activities, and counseling, have made use, whether explicitly or not, of the notion of speech event (Duranti 1981; Scollon & Scollon 1981; Heath 1983; Philips 1983; Anderson & Stokes 1984; Brenneis & Myers 1984; Schieffelin & Ochs 1986; Watson-Gegeo & White in preparation). For many researchers, the speech event still represents a level of analysis that has the advantage of preserving information about the social system as a whole while at the same

time allowing the researcher to get into the details of personal acts (Duranti to appear).

The Speaking model also represents a basic difference between ES and other branches of linguistics: the grid, in its various versions, has always maintained an *etic* status and was never accompanied by a (general) theory of the possible relationships among the various components. Such a theoretical discussion, in Hymes's program, seemed to be possible only at the *local* level (i.e. with respect to particular communities) and not within a more global, comparative framework. This entails that, within ES, there has never been an attempt at formulating a *general phonemics* of communicative events. The relationship among the components of the model are each time shown to be meaningful within a particular society – as an *emic* description, that is, – but do not necessarily exemplify any universal principle of the relation between speech and context in *societies* in general. The few attempts to draw general principles, such as Irvine 1979 are in fact discussions of how one should *not* infer universal features from what a given group chooses to do in a particular type of speech event; that is, what is 'formal' in one context need not be formal in another. (The only exceptions here are some attempts at elucidating general *areal* patterns where there are enough local studies to allow for it, e.g. Roberts & Forman 1972; Abrahams 1983.)

Is this tendency simply a reflection of the cultural relativism that ES shares with most of modern anthropology? It might well be the case. But most importantly, I think, the care for specific *emic* accounts and the reluctance to posit universal principles (with the exception of Brown & Levinson 1978) is strongly related to the fundamental anti-Universalism that characterizes ES as originally defined by Hymes. If some kind of universal claim is ever accepted by ES, it will be similar to what Merleau-Ponty (1964) called *lateral universal*, that is, the universality of the intersubjective enterprise rather than of the structures. To understand this, we must reflect again on the goals of ES. Differently from other approaches within linguistics, ES is concerned with language use as a link to and as an instrument of social life. This means that ethnographers of speaking, through a number of subjective, objective, and intersubjective methods (e.g. intuitions, audio-recording, transcription, interviews, participation in the life of the 'subjects'), get involved in studying an 'object' which is more complex and multiform than that typically studied in other branches of linguistics. One of the goals of ES is to maintain the complexity of *language as praxis* rather than reduce it to abstract, independent principles. In other words, the kind of universality ES is interested in cannot be the abstract kind of generative grammar or of conversational maxims. In the latter cases (i.e. for Chomsky and Grice), many aspects of the context must be removed in order to 'see' the principles

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at work. The researcher must create a vacuum wherein to show that certain structures or constraints are operating 'under' or 'above' what is going on. Once this is achieved, the researcher's work is over: the pieces are left on the ground. The whole is not put together again. Ethnographers, on the other hand – like the people they study – struggle to both capture and maintain the whole of the interaction at hand. The elements of one level (e.g. phonological register, lexical choice, discourse strategies) must be related to the elements of another level (e.g. social identities, values) – which, in turn, is further defined and constituted by those elements. In this process, ethnographers act as the linking elements between different levels and systems of communication. In so doing, they act in a similar fashion to those psychologists who study learning and cognitive development by consciously creating functional environments where behavior can be observed without destroying elements of the 'whole task' (Luria 1979; Griffin, Cole & Newman 1982; LCHC 1984).

A possible criticism of speech-event analysis is that it tends to select strips of interaction that are labeled by a culture, but it may overlook those interactions which are not recognized as units of some sort by the members. It should be mentioned here that, although the presence of a lexical term for a given activity or 'strip of interaction' is only one level of local organization of experience – perhaps the most obviously ideological – the lack of a term for any given such 'strip' is an interesting clue for fieldworkers.[5]

There is nothing, however, in the Speaking model or in the very idea of speech event that invites research on one kind of activity over another. Although ethnographers take native taxonomies seriously (Abrahams & Bauman 1971; Gossen 1972), what they end up studying is a by-product of what members of the culture describe as relevant or important and what

[5] The lack of native labeling for certain kinds of often unbounded activities may however be a problem for the necessary coordination between participants and observer. Those who are being observed might feel that they need to be 'doing something' in order for someone to be observing them. When Elinor Ochs, Martha Platt and I were collecting data on language use and language acquisition in a western Samoan village, for instance, we recorded and studied different kinds of events. While I mostly concentrated on conversations among adults and formal meetings of the village council, Ochs and Platt documented household interaction between young children and their caretakers (older siblings, parents, or grandparents). Whereas participants almost immediately accepted the intrusion of my tape-recorder during conversations and important meetings without any major or lasting shift in the nature of their interaction, the people who were home with their younger children kept trying, during the first weeks, to frame their interaction with each other and with the reseachers as 'doing school' (*fai le 'aaoga*). It was only after the startling realization that the researcher had nothing to teach and in fact wanted to learn something from them that people stopped performing school routines and body postures and accepted the intrusion of the researcher with the tape-recorder. The asymmetry between these contexts – the conversations and meeting on the one hand and the household interaction on the other – interestingly correlates with the presence versus absence of native labels for the activity at hand: whereas there are local labels for 'conversation' (*talanoaga*) and 'meeting' (*fono*), there is no native category for staying home with the kids. It would seem then that by reframing the interaction as 'doing school,' participants tried to create a context that could be reportable and perhaps valuable, within the local range of known and admissible activities.

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they are expected to document as practitioners of a particular research tradition.

12.3.3. Speech act

The notion of speech *act* stresses the pragmatic force of speech, its ability not only to describe the world but to change it by relying on public, shared conventions (Austin 1975). Historically, the importance of Austin's work was to provide a philosophically sophisticated discussion of meaning in language that did not solely rely on the notion of truth (Levinson 1983). In order to explain the *illocutionary* force of an utterance one must be able to relate the *locution* – i.e. the words used – with its context. Thus, the sentence *I don't like to watch tv* can be used to do different things according to when it is used, by whom, etc. The different *uses* of such an utterance may all share the same linguistic *form* – actually, some abstraction of it – but they will serve different *functions* – e.g. to justify the absence of a tv set in my house, to object to an evening at home, to explain why I can't follow a conversation about tv programs. The same utterance can thus be used to different ends, by relying on different shared understanding of the social event in which speech occurs. The analyst's task is to explain the relationship between the speaker's subjective reality, the linguistic form chosen, and the audience response: 'The level of speech acts mediates immediately between the usual levels of grammar and the rest of a speech event or situation in that it implicates both linguistic form and social norms' (Hymes 1972a: 57).

The acceptance of the notion of speech act does not necessarily imply the acceptance of the epistemological foundations or underlying ideology (Pratt 1981) of speech-act theory. In particular, such a theory has been said to give too much prominence to the speaker's intentions for the definition of the utterance meaning. A number of researchers have lately shown that the role assigned to the speaker's intentions in the interpretation of speech actually varies across cultures and contexts (Streeck 1980; Ochs 1982; Rosaldo 1982; Kochman 1983; Duranti 1984). In the cases of verbal dueling among Blacks discussed by Kochman (1983), for instance, a speech act cannot be defined as insult until the receiver has chosen to interpret it as such. In the Samoan *fono* – a traditional politico-judiciary arena – the speaker's original intentions and understanding of certain events at the time of the speech act seem at times irrelevant for those who interpret his words and assess his responsibility (Duranti 1984). As demonstrated by analysts of conversation, however, even within American white middle class society, the emergent model of verbal interaction is much more dialogical than is

such as the socioeconomic status of ethnic identity of the speakers (e.g. American white middle class, American working class, Thai peasants); the speech acts that are being performed (e.g. threats, promises, apologies); or the particular social occasion that has brought the participants together (e.g. a birthday party, waiting for the bus, calling the police). According to CA, the relevance of these contextual features should be used by the analyst only when the participants themselves explicitly evoke such features (Schegloff & Sacks 1973; Schegloff 1986a). On the other hand, certain principles such as 'one speaker at a time' and notions like 'prior speaker,' 'current speaker,' and 'recipient' are instead said to be always relevant, regardless of the specific occasion on which conversation takes place (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson 1974; Moerman 1977; Schegloff, Jefferson & Sacks 1977; Schegloff 1986a, 1986b). CA has thus defined an area of study in which the 'problems' and the 'solutions' speakers encounter in conversation can be described without referring to aspects of what ES researchers would define as crucial elements of the socio-cultural context. In so doing, CA shares something with the 'autonomous' trends within contemporary formal linguistics. Both CA and generative grammar, for instance, claim to be dealing with a level of structural relationships and dependencies among speech forms which can be studied separately from the occasion in which they are produced (unless we consider 'conversation' a kind of occasion). CA, however, makes no claim as to the innate nature of the turn-taking mechanisms and, more importantly, shares with ES (and ethnomethodology) the concern for the participants' point of view (or 'orientation'). The methods for arriving at defining the participants' perspective, however, may differ. For CA, what is found in the interaction (on a transcript, for instance) is the only legitimate source of knowledge for inferring the participants' concern. For ES, on the other hand, certain aspects of the social identity of the speakers as well as their past history are important. Furthermore, ethnographers routinely rely on members' accounts and explanation of what they (or others) were doing and meaning in a given verbal interaction. Those accounts, however, cannot by themselves constitute the only evidence of certain notions or practices. The researcher must search for both direct and indirect evidence of certain patterns of behavior. Let me give an example from my own work. In Samoan society, members can often articulate their expectations about particular social actors' duties and rights *vis à vis* different contexts. When I analyzed the speech of chiefs and orators participating in village council meetings (*fono*), those expectations seemed important for both me and the Samoan research assistants in interpreting the interaction. Despite the fact that participants' verbal behavior during the meetings was clearly part of the *stuff* that members of the society use to define certain people as 'chiefs' and others as 'orators,' native competent speakers were

usually recognized by the dominant ideology (Streeck 1980; Goodwin 1981; Schegloff 1982).

More generally, ES is interested in the relationship between the Austinian notion of speech act and various aspects of the local theories of communication and interpretation, including (1) the relationship between modes of production and modes of interpretation, as for instance found in the local organization of task accomplishment (Duranti & Ochs 1986); (2) the notion of self and the speaker's ability to control the interpretation of his or her own words (Rosaldo 1982; Shore 1982; Holquist 1983); (3) the local ontology of interpretation (e.g. whether it involves the ability to be in someone else's place or mind) (Ochs 1984); (4) the relevance of 'sincerity' for the performance of any speech act (Rosaldo 1982).

12.4. Other approaches: conversation analysis

By no means do the three kinds of context discussed above exhaust the possible or the existing levels of study of talk in social interaction (see for instance the papers in van Dijk 1985; Schiffrin 1984). Let me mention here another approach that shares with ES some important concerns and goals. The approach I have in mind is conversation analysis (CA). The relationship between CA and ES over the last ten or fifteen years has been a complex one, with moments of great unity (see Gumperz & Hymes 1972) and moments of separation and misunderstanding. Some recent developments in terms of both theoretical pronouncements and participation in conferences and symposia seem to indicate the possibility of a fruitful osmosis between the two schools. Although their methodologies are quite distinct, ES and CA do share some important assumptions and concerns (see the relevant papers and their introductions in Gumperz & Hymes 1972). In particular, both ES and CA tend to stress the role of speech in *creating* context, the need to take the participants' perspective in the analysis of their interaction, the cooperative nature of verbal communication – the latest feature being related, but not identical, to the claim of the emergent nature of (some aspects of) the social order.

There are at least two sources of apparent disagreement between CA and ES: (1) a different notion of what constitutes 'context'; (2) the issue of the universality of the turn-taking system and its correlates. A brief discussion of these issues should help clarify some possible misunderstandings.

12.4.1. Context

CA looks at talk-in-interaction, claiming the independence of the turn-taking system from various aspects of the socio-cultural context of speech

continuously trying to match the recorded performance with some ideal notion of what was appropriate for a given actor in a particular situation. Given the importance of the interplay between projected and actual behaviors in the interpretation of talk, it would seem to be a logical error to accept certain role notions only in their emergent versions, and not as part of people's guidelines for explaining how social order could or should be achieved in particular contexts.

2.4.2. Universality

Although, as far as I know, CA has never officially claimed the universality of the English turn-taking system and its corollaries across societies and languages, such a claim has been taken to be implicit in their practice.[6] A few studies, some of which are in the ES tradition, have challenged the universality of certain aspects of the turn-taking mechanisms (Philips 1976; Godard 1977; Philips 1983; Wolfson 1983). As discussed by Schegloff (1986b), however, the issue is not really resolved by simply concentrating on variation and differences. We would not gain very much insight into the phenomena being described by simply lining up – *à la* Popper – a set of apparent counterexamples to what is claimed by CA for English. The issue is at least twofold: (1) what is in common beyond (or despite) the differences (Schegloff 1986b); and (2) how are those differences related to *other differences* – a point recently recognized by Schegloff (in press a) in discussing cross-linguistic work on repair mechanisms. In fact, even if the universal nature of the phenomena described by CA were to be further corroborated by a wide range of cross-cultural data, the 'autonomous' level of the discoveries about conversational interaction would still leave open the question of the *meaning* of those 'problems' and 'solutions' for different cultures. Silence is a typical example of a phenomenon that, differently distributed across cultures, can acquire different meanings (Basso 1970; Reisman 1974; Bauman 1983). More generally, what appears identical on a transcript (e.g. a sequence, a set of words or interruptions, a pause) might be quite different in people's lives or in their minds. For this reason, I believe that both CA and ES are needed to help clarify the mechanisms and meaning of daily verbal interaction.

12.5. Conclusions

Speaking or its absence seem significant in most, if not all, human interac-

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[6] Again, perhaps paradoxically, CA finds itself aligned with traditional generative grammarians, who claim that the in-depth study of one language, viz. English, might be sufficient for making interesting hypotheses about Universal Grammar.

tions. The very moment we start looking at a sequence of talk, we realize that the accompanying interaction could have not been the same without it. Even in its most phatic or seemingly redundant uses, talk is always *constitutive of* some portion of reality: it either makes something already existing *present* to (or for) the participants or creates something anew.

ES's fundamental theoretical contribution, beyond description of communicative patterns within and across societies, is the discussion of the role of speaking in the shaping of people's lives. It is thus the true *semantics* of human language. Without necessarily rejecting formal or structural accounts of language use, ES remains an important element in establishing a linguistics of human praxis, a field of study in which the analysts do not lose track of the sociohistorical context of speech, while trying to bridge the gap between linguistic form and linguistic content. In its attempts to describe what other subfields of linguistics leave out or take for granted, ES stays within the tradition of what Luria (1978) called 'romantic science.' Its goal is not to strive for simplicity measures or one-dimensional patterns, but rather to capture, through ethnography and linguistic analysis, the inherent 'heteroglossia' of any (one) language (Bakhtin 1981), the complexity of the human experience as defined and revealed in everyday discourse.

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