Gumperz and Social Justice

John Gumperz’s work was characterized by a concern for social justice. This article traces some of the ways this concern manifested itself through such concepts as “key situation,” and in research foci on moments of social selection in powerful state institutions. It reviews some critiques of Gumperz’s approach to the problem of how social difference is tied to social inequality, and some of the productive responses to those critiques, anchoring Gumperz’s work as a major contribution to critical sociolinguistics.

Much of the attention afforded John Gumperz’s work has focused on how he has helped us grasp how meaning is made in social interaction. Equally important has been his work on intercultural communication, although that work has perhaps been more controversial. In this essay, I explore how both are connected to a concern for social justice, through an examination of the making of social difference in interpersonal interaction, and of the difference that difference can make to people’s life chances. Doing so will require returning to some critiques of Gumperz’s work on intercultural communication, and examining what kinds of concepts and data help us avoid some of the pitfalls of overly culturalist explanations for social inequality, while allowing us to discover how language and culture remain, nonetheless, implicated in its making.

Gumperz’s notion of contextualization, treated at length in other contributions to this issue, depends on the idea that people are socialized to conventionally associate specific communicative resources with specific interpretive frames, so that interaction is, in his terms, largely a process of inferencing (Gumperz 1982). In his view, this process is neither unchanging nor universal, otherwise we would all do things the same way all the time, and never have any difficulty understanding what other people mean as long as we shared the same basic linguistic system. We would never have to complain to our friends about how our intimate partners react badly to our most innocent speculations on the world, nor stare in puzzlement when we watch other people blithely doing what we ourselves would never dream of (like, say, touching—or not touching—perfect strangers, or standing what seems like really close or really far away when they talk).

His explanation is that people work out different ways of being in the world and carrying out processes of inferencing according to the groups they are in. At least part of this process would seem to be arbitrary: Gumperz attempts no explanation why, say, for some groups falling intonation might index an affirmation and rising intonation a question, while others make no such association. This specific example, as many readers will know arises in Crosstalk (1979), the BBC documentary devoted to...
Gumperz's work: we see white British-accented employees of a large company line up for lunch at the company cafeteria. They are asked at each station what they want by a server of South Asian origin. Gravy is an option for one main course; the server asks if gravy is wanted with the falling intonation most British (and North American) speakers of English associate with a statement, not a question. This is interpreted as rude and even aggressive by the clients.

For Gumperz, there is simply an arbitrary difference in how the same intonation contour indexes question or statement. This difference, he would argue, is due to the separate worlds in which such conventions are constructed: falling intonation could index anything (or nothing) but in the particular communicative context he investigated it just happened to index questions for one set of interlocutors and statements for another. Precisely because it indexes something for both, it is available as a basis for inferencing. In the absence of information that such contours are culturally variable, speakers can only mobilize their own frames to do the inferencing everyday interaction requires. I will note here that this account, of course, fails to take into consideration the possibility that the social positions of the speakers (as British-born and white vs. of South Asian origin and racialized; as women or men; as servers or consumers; and so on) might play a role in how and why people make the inferences they do; this critique will be treated more fully below.

Other elements of communication seem more tightly tied to culture, at least insofar as, for instance, some groups might value individual thought, and so perhaps accord people time to think through a response to a question, while others might believe in the importance of collective action, and so busily finish off each others’ sentences—in other words, at least insofar as specific communicative behaviours can be seen as material manifestations or enactments of a moral order. In allowing for both arbitrary and culturally meaningful forms of indexing, I would argue that Gumperz addressed the problem of cultural relativism, taking the position that inferencing procedures might well be universal, while the details of what got inferred using which linguistic resources were more likely relative and variable in their arbitrariness. This was an important contribution to attempts to move away from the destructive consequences of cultural Darwinism, or any related attempt to apply evolutionary theory to language, culture and society, as was the case in Nazism, colonialism and slavery, and their contemporary manifestations and legacies.

Either way, the chain of reasoning relies on the idea of a group, and therefore of group boundaries. If there are cultural differences in communicative conventions and their contextualization functions, it is because people fall out along lines of difference in terms of the experiences that they share, and therefore the sense they make of those differences, and therefore the communicative conventions they develop to index their frames of interpretation. Miscommunication across group boundaries is predictable, then, since the putative separation of one group from another prevents people from becoming familiar with the ways of others, and therefore with how to interpret them.

Gumperz was quite concerned with how such miscommunication could result in more than simple interactional discomfort. He noticed that there were many situations in daily life when, in the process of trying to understand others, people jumped rapidly from judgments about the intelligibility of utterances, to judgments about the competences and legitimacy of the utterers. That is, he thought people were less likely to posit cultural difference and related miscommunication than to assume their interlocutors might be stupid, incompetent, crazy or otherwise socially defective. As we saw in the example of the British workplace cafeteria, for example, hearing an utterance as an affirmation rather than the expected question led clients to evaluate the servers as arrogant or oblivious rather than to posit cultural difference (we are not told what the servers thought). This is bad enough in random encounters in airports or corner stores, but worse when important things are at stake.

Gumperz argued that modern urban life, organized through faceless bureaucratic institutions, created “key situations” in which many things are at stake in what would
otherwise be fleeting, and possibly relatively inconsequential, encounters—and that
indeed, what appeared faceless actually involved real people with real life histories
and their associated cultural capital. In situations like job interviews, medical diag-
nostic interviews, or trials, not much time is devoted to figuring out what someone
might mean by something. On the contrary, the expectation is that some participants
must arrive fairly quickly at a judgment of another, based largely on what they say
and how they say it, but also, based on seeing them solely as monodimensional
specimens of their social position, rather than the complex human beings they
really are.

Further, Gumperz argued, since communicative conventions pattern along group
boundaries, the judgers might well jump to the conclusion that whatever applied to
one member of a group would apply to all. In this way, intercultural miscommuni-
cation could also potentially lead to stereotyping, and hence to institutionalized
forms of prejudice. He put language at the heart of long-standing as well as emergent
forms of social inequality, in which gatekeepers from one culture systematically fail to
understand, and therefore to adequately evaluate or understand, members of others.

In this sense, Gumperz was taking a strong stand not only against the longer
histories linking language and discrimination, but also against the specific linguistic
and cultural deficit hypotheses which drove a great deal of social policy in the 1960s
and 1970s, at least in North America and especially in education; hypotheses that
even today persist in how policy makers think about how to help groups whose
children remain marginal in mainstream school systems. This deficit model, drawing
from a long line of European and North American thinking about the relative devel-
opment of cultural and linguistic systems since at least the 19th century, postulates that
what is taught in schools represents the highest form of intellectual development on
a universal scale, and that students need to be exposed to that before coming to
school, as well as have access to it on a continued basis outside of school, if they are
to do well. It lies at the basis of a number of preschool and after-school programs
which have existed in North America since the 1960s, and which are intended to help
bridge the world of the community and the world of the school in the interests of
encouraging so-called “at-risk” students to stay in school and do well there. Gumperz
and other scholars (notably William Labov 1982 and Frederick Erickson 1982) argued
that the problem was not that some groups had linguistic and cultural resources that
were not as well developed as those taught at school, it was that the ones they had
were not the ones schools used as a basis for evaluation. That is, that the problem was
one not of linguistic deficit, but of linguistic difference. As we shall see below, while this
position (which came to be known as the “difference hypothesis” for explaining in
particular robust patterns of school failure among some social groups in Europe and
North America), was later criticized as being insufficiently attentive to the workings
of relations of power, it nonetheless represented an important first step toward
addressing ideologies underlying institutional relations of inequality.

This model was attacked on a number of fronts. The first had to do with the
problem of generalization. The educational anthropologist John Ogbu (1993) notably
argued that cultural and linguistic difference was an inadequate explanation for the
patterns of school success and failure in the United States. If the difference hypothesis
was correct, Ogbu wrote, it would predict that educational difficulties would arise
wherever linguistic and cultural differences occurred. And yet, in the United States,
some groups tended to do better than average at school, and some tended to do
worse. It could not be difference which would explain the better-than-random
chances at school success for (for example) some Asian-American populations, and
at-school failure for African-Americans. Instead, Ogbu argued, one had to take into
account what groups learn about their life chances over generations, as connected to
their position in society and the resources they have at their disposal. For recent
immigrants, school is one of the few ways liberal democratic society holds out the
hope of economic stability, political representation and social integration. Parents and
students will invest in school success as part of a strategy for making immigration
work for them. If it does work, what has been learned is that investing in school, one way or another, pays off (though Ogbu did not examine closely all of the different shapes such efforts might take).

This might not apply to refugees, or anyone else who ended up in the United States not of their own volition, whether forcibly brought there (as in the case of slavery), or forcibly incorporated (as in the case of Native Americans). Some recent arrivals might not be focused on staying. Others groups could have tried and failed to make the system work for them. Still others could have reason to believe that the system was not in fact made for them at all, and that even miraculously good results would fail to result in commensurate social, economic or political status. So something else is taking place, requiring us to ask what and when differences count in the production and reproduction of social inequality. It seems that it is not that differences are irrelevant; it is that they are just as likely to be produced by inequality as to produce it. It is not failure to communicate that is the problem, it is the unequal position of enunciation that matters.

This problem is connected to a second one, which has to do with group boundaries. While much of Gumperz’s work focussed on interethnic encounters produced by postcolonial immigration in the United States, England, and Germany, the model was taken up by others to look at miscommunication across other social boundaries, such as U.S. post-slavery racialization (Erickson 1979; Michaels 1981); gender (Maltz and Borker 1982; Tannen 1990) or, in equal inspiration from the work of Basil Bernstein in England, class (Brice Heath 1983; Dannequin 1987; Collins 1988). In these cases, the encounter across difference could scarcely be said to be recent, and so the argument about ignorance of the other seemed inadequate.

Ogbu, as we have seen, showed that despite racial segregation, it was hardly the case that whites and blacks in the United States had no knowledge of each other. Blacks, who like all minorities, were more familiar with the dominant group than the dominant group was of the minority, were quite able to produce white talk; it was just that doing so meant betraying their community at the risk of never being taken seriously by whites (Ogbu 1999). Similarly, it was argued, while a certain amount of gender segregation does characterize most societies, those societies would scarcely exist if men and women didn’t interact (Uchida 1992). In the same way, class differences are part of the way capitalist societies are organized. While for some individuals interacting with members of different classes might feel as though the cultural practices they encounter have arisen separately from different realms of experience which happen to come together later in life, those realms are inextricably tied together. Group boundaries are, then, about more than social distance; they also organize inequality.

Finally, a series of articles (Singh, et al. 1988; Kandiah 1991; Sarangi 1994) focused on the interpretation of the data Gumperz presented. In cases where he argued that communicative performance was misunderstood because culturally different, his critics argued that at least one other interpretation was available: that minorities, faced with white evaluators, understood quickly how poor their chances of success were, and acted accordingly, and that white evaluators were likely to fail to give minority clients or applicants the benefit of their time or understanding. Racism, they argued, was minimally at least as plausible an explanation for the data as difference—or, as Uchida (1992:559) put it, we need to look to dominance, not difference, in order to explain interactional patterns. For example, a candidate’s silence could be understood as an expression of defeat in the face of interviewers who fail to take qualifications seriously, or resistance to a line of questioning understood to be setting one up for failure.

As important as these critiques were, it is important to note that none of them called into question whether or not difference might be related to inequality, or that face-to-face interaction was an important locus for their articulation. Rather, they left us with a number of questions about what kind of locus interaction might be, and what the difference-inequality articulation might look like; and indeed, how we can address it empirically at all. It is to these points that I would now like to turn.
Significantly, these critiques raised methodological concerns about what it is or is not possible to read from recorded interactions. While not calling into question Gumperz’s insight that the building of social difference, and its imbrication in relations of power, had to happen somewhere observable, these critiques questioned whether looking at face-to-face interaction, even in key situations, could be enough. One set of problems raised had to do with what you can learn from interaction alone regarding the experience of participants; another had to do with the relationship between short-term and long-term consequences (and antecedents) of interaction and the role inequality plays in forming the knowledge participants bring to it.

The first set of concerns, then, addressed how the analyst knows what is going on; what expectations and resources participants bring to an interaction, how they respond as interactional events unfold, and why. Gumperz’s methodological response to these concerns was to rely in the first instance on fairly standard models of linguistic description, arguing that based on techniques of elicitation and observation it is possible to describe the stable conventions of language use proper to a bounded speech community just as one can describe its phonemic inventory. Those patterns should be observable, whether or not speakers are actually conscious of them, insofar as it is possible to witness their regular patterns of co-occurrence with contextual phenomena (including what precedes and comes next) or other aspects of communicative behavior. This assumes, of course, that speech communities are bounded and stable, characterized by internal variability perhaps, but variability that one can apprehend as systematic.

In the second instance, he relied on post hoc interviews with participants to identify moments of tension when the making of difference and inequality was felt to be happening. Here, Auer (1984) raised the concern that what one can retrieve after the fact is at best an approximate account of what might have been going on at the time; inferencing is not always subject to recall or even to consciousness (Cicourel 1988). Finally, as the reflexive turn in anthropology of the 1980s demonstrated over and over again, what a minority person will tell a white person from a university, on the record, is always subject to situated inference on its own (cf. Lafont 1977). So, while it seemed quite clear that in each case identified by Gumperz where something relevant to social boundaries and social inequality was going on, exactly what that was seemed to require a different set of tools to determine, and possibly a different set of preliminary assumptions.

These preliminary assumptions then have to do with what kinds of social conditions we need to know about in order to grasp what kinds of resources and expectations people bring to their interactions, to explain what happens there, and to fully apprehend their consequences. To put the problem in social theoretical terms, the issue is what role interactions play in social structuration (Giddens 1984; Cicourel 2002). If we understand social relations to be always somehow formed by relations of inequality, we have an opening to asking what forms of inequality are relevant to participants and to interactions. In the first instance, we can ask to what extent communicative resources are evenly distributed, or, more accurately, who has access to what kinds of communicative resources, and who has access to determining their value—and therefore who gets to judge whom and on what grounds. Such a widening of scope from the details of specific interactions requires some kind of understanding of interactions as situated in webs or fields which operate both across time and across space (Giddens 1984) as well as incorporating the problem of who and what has value—concerns also captured in Bourdieu’s (1982) notion of linguistic markets and symbolic fields of activity.

It also becomes necessary to incorporate trajectories and histories: what people know already (as Ogbu argued) about how markets are structured and how the processes of social categorization that constrain their lives and those of everyone they know are likely to play out in certain kinds of social institutions, controlled by certain kinds of people, with certain kinds of overdetermined results. This is not to say that social structure determines social interaction (this is, I think, a flawed reading of
Bourdieu and Giddens), but rather that the two are connected in complex and not always predictable ways, which may include production as well as reproduction; intended, unintended and perverse consequences; resistance as well as complicity and collusion (Willis 1977; Foley 1990). In other words, part of the ethnographic problem is to discover where interactions fit in temporal and spatial webs, and how the resources at stake there circulate, are valued, and how conditions alternately orient participants to specific interests and ways of doing things, or are loose enough to allow for innovation, creation, invention, production.

It is important to note that much of the material I have cited here, which points to a more broadly historical and ethnographic approach, as well as one more centrally informed by political economy, is contemporaneous with Gumperz’s work. The difficulty has been to find the methodological bridge among approaches more focussed on the dynamics of interaction and those more focussed on life histories, institutional processes, circulations of people, goods and discourses, that is, which take in longer temporal and broader spatial dynamics. It has also sometimes been difficult to sort out what we actually believe about the relationship between social interaction and social structuration. The dichotomy between so-called macro- and so-called micro-approaches to the study of social life breaks down in the light of Gumperz’ insight that that you can’t actually have one without the other, and you certainly can’t explain social process without some place for social process to happen. What remains to be fully developed are the concrete methodological and theoretical consequences of that insight.

His work opened up a line of inquiry in which the question of how social difference is tied to social inequality is central. He showed how important it is to take seriously the idea that language is a central dimension of social processes, and a key terrain for investigation of classic problems of social theory: what kinds of social categorization make sense under what kinds of historical conditions? How do individual experiences and practices link up to positioning in those social categorization processes? What is the relationship between agency and structure?

In this his work laid the foundations for contemporary approaches linking contextualization and framing to indexicality, and to the idea that it is not possible to simply read off social meaning from linguistic form. Where one stands, one’s perspective, is tied to how one’s social position constrains what one can know and what one might want to achieve, but it doesn’t determine them. Variability may be a resource for making social difference and social inequality, but it can also be a product of it, as Ogbu pointed out.

By pushing the boundaries of linguistic and ethnographic description, Gumperz raised problems astutely recognized by his critics; but those critiques need to be seen not as undermining the value of Gumperz’s work, but rather showing us where his premises lead us, beyond an attachment to systems and wholes, toward processes which blur ontological distinctions between language and society. This was also the result of a shared commitment to social justice; one that was certainly a product of its time, and of personal histories, but that remains if anything all the more relevant today.

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