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Ethnopragmatics and Beyond:
Intentionality and Agency Across Languages and Cultures

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Introduction[1]

In this chapter I briefly review the fieldwork experiences and research questions that in the early 1990s lead me to propose the approach I called "ethnopragmatics." After discussing the anthropological critique of the use of intentions in theories of meaning, I narrow the scope of this essay to the notion of agency and its grammatical encoding across languages. I end with some reflections on the need to separate intentionality from agency.

In the original formulation, the "pragmatics" part of the term "ethnopragmatics" was meant to recognize the focus on the contextual life of language in general and languages in particular and the "ethno" part highlighted the need to understand local communicative practices and speakers' attitudes toward the meaning and impact of those practices. Over the years, the scope of ethnopragmatics as originally conceived has expanded. To my original interest in the culturally relative weight of speakers' intentions in interpreting speech as action (e.g. Duranti 1984, 1993a), I added a conceptualization of language as both an expression and a realization of human agency more generally (Duranti 2001, 2004). I also came to see the earlier discussion of intentionality (by myself and some other anthropologists) as too limited or under-theorized (Duranti 2006, 2008). My efforts to remedy these problems have brought me to see the advantages of an approach that merges my original conceptualization of ethnopragmatics with a theorizing of human subjectivity and intersubjectivity that takes inspiration from the work of the philosopher Edmund Husserl and others inspired by his teaching and by his writings. Whether or not this approach should retain the name "ethnopragmatics" is less important than the issues that such an approach was and still is meant to address.

In the following sections I will review the anthropological critique of the use of intentions in theories of meaning and my own shift, in the 1990s, to an analysis of agency in language as an alternative research strategy. After discussing some recent empirical findings on the encoding of agency across languages, I will re-examine intentionality in a Husserlian perspective and argue that (a) it is pan-human, (b) it co-exists with and informs other, culture- and context-specific notions of intentionality, and (c) is related to but distinct from agency.

The anthropological critique of the role of intentions

My first fieldwork experience in (then Western) Samoa made me skeptical of some of the putative universal principles of language use and language understanding then common within the field of pragmatics. A key concept in pragmatics at the time was the key role of intentions in defining the meaning of utterances. In Samoa (and, as it turned out, in other societies), intentions did not seem to be as important for interpreting the meaning of speakers' utterances as they had been made out to be in Grice's (1957) definition of "non-natural" meaning or in Searle's (1969) original version of speech act theory and in his later attempt to extend it to a theory of mind (Searle 1983). I argued then that the local theories of meaning uncovered by ethnographers should, at least at the start, have the equivalent weight of the local theories of meaning proposed by Oxford, Cambridge, or Berkeley philosophers (Duranti 1985). This perspective was consistent with earlier criticism of pragmatic universals (e.g. [Ochs] Keenan 1976) and was aiming for a culturally more nuanced theory of meaning; ideally one that would include both western and non-western conceptualizations of human interpretive processes.

My analysis of verbal interactions in Samoa, especially in the context of the meetings of the village council (*fono*) were supported by Elinor Ochs' simultaneous investigation of Samoan adult-child interaction in the same community (Ochs 1982) and provided empirical evidence that individual intentions are not always as central as one might have thought for defining the meaning of what is being done with words. One key example to support this point was a discussion that I witnessed and audio recorded in which

a fairly high ranking orator, member of the village council, was accused of embarrassing the village title-holders (*matai*) for having announced a visit by the district Member of Parliament that never happened. The fact that such a visit was expected to be accompanied by gifts for all those present made the alleged offense even more serious. In reviewing the transcript of the interaction, I was struck by the fact that throughout the lengthy argumentation of the case brought to the council by one of the two most senior orators in the community the issue of intentions was never brought up and the defendant never tried to deflect the accusation by pointing out that he had acted in good faith or that he had no control over what the Member of Parliament would do. This mode of interaction was consistent with previous ethnographic accounts in which Samoans had been described as focused on the consequences of actions rather than on their motivations (Shore 1982). I used this case as the starting point for a critique of intentionalist views of meaning.

Some of the theoretical inspiration for my analysis of the Samoan materials came from Clifford Geertz's (1973) invitation to engage in interpretive anthropology and Victor Turner's (1974) theory of social dramas. Another important source of inspiration was my participation in 1983-84 in the activities of the Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition (LCHC) at the University of California, San Diego. It was from the LCHC Director, Michael Cole, and other LCHC members, Peg Griffin in particular, that I learned about the work of Mikhail Bakhtin (1981, Voloshinov 1973) and I was introduced to dialectical approaches to the interface between mind and society (Cole 1985; Cole and Griffin 1986; Vygotsky 1978). This is how these authors made it into the first version of my paper on intentions and Samoan theories of meaning (Duranti 1984). As I was looking for theoretical enlightenment, I encountered Vygotskian theories of semiotic mediation and Bakhtinian dialogism, which seemed to fit the bill. I soon discovered that I was not alone in my skepticism toward philosophical and linguistic pragmatics. Criticism of Searle's approach and speech act theory in general had become quite popular among linguistic anthropologists. Its birth is often traced to the posthumously published essay by Michelle Rosaldo (1982) on Ilongot speech acts, in which she questioned the universality of intentionality and sincerity in meaning-

making, but earlier critiques of Austin's limited view of the performative function of utterances can be found in other writings as well, for example, in Silverstein (1977). A double session at the 1983 Annual Meetings of the American Anthropological Association where I first presented my work on Samoan speech acts captured the anti-intentionalist Zeitgeist, as documented in Hill and Irvine's (1993) edited volume *Responsibility and Evidence in Oral Discourse.*

Looking back now at some of those early discussions, I am struck by two problems that went largely unnoticed. The first was the tendency to ignore the differences between Austin's and Searle's theoretical approach— for example, not enough was made of the fact that Austin was much more interested in public and ritual uses of language than private states of mind and that he was more concerned with conditions of failure ("infelicities") than with conditions of success ("felicities"). The second problem was the lack of serious engagement with a solid tradition of European philosophers whose approach was either distinct from Austin's and Searle's versions of analytical philosophy or in direct opposition to it. These two omissions marked a shift from earlier studies in which ethnographers had either engaged with Austin's work in a critical but constructive way (e.g., Finnegan 1969) or acknowledged the insights of European continental philosophers and integrated some of these thinkers' ideas into their own writings (e.g., Geertz 1973, 1983a; Turner 1986).

Revisiting grammar in context: the encoding of agency

After proposing a theoretical synthesis of the anthropological critique of the use of intentions and sincerity in the interpretation of human action (Duranti 1993b), I returned to the study of Samoan grammar in discourse that I had started to develop while writing my dissertation (Duranti 1981). In reanalyzing the speeches of Samoan leaders arguing, accusing, or defending themselves or others, I found that, in the midst of elaborate metaphors and esoteric proverbs, it was the use of particular grammatical constructions (i.e., those dealing with agency) that revealed what a person was trying "to do with words." Since the two main categories of acts that were being performed through these utterances with nominally

expressed agents were accusing and blaming, I hypothesized that speakers were linguistically constituting themselves as well as the referents of their utterances as particular kind of 'persons' or 'selves.' At that time Geertz's (1983b) comparison of the notion of 'person' in three societies was my inspiration, but I later realized that Mauss (1938) was the real originator of the idea of a public 'self' (or, in French, "moi"). Although the floor was open to anyone, only a few members of the council engaged in these speech acts; they coincided with those individuals who were perceived to be strong and effective leaders. Their authority was being constituted through the use of particular types of grammatical constructions.

To underscore the connection between the encoding of agency and the assignment of responsibility of one's or others' actions, in my 1994 book *From Grammar to Politics: Linguistic Anthropology in a Samoan Village* I introduced the notion of "moral flow" of discourse to complement the notion of "information flow" introduced by Wallace Chafe (1979) and used by John Du Bois (1987) in his discussion of the discourse basis of syntactic relations (e.g., Subject, Object) and semantic roles (e.g., Agent, Patient). To capture the key methodological and theoretical concerns that constituted my approach, I came up with the term "ethnopragmatic," which I defined as:

> a double sided, inherently eclectic and interdisciplinary analytical enterprise that relies on detailed grammatical descriptions on the one hand and ethnographic accounts on the other. The "ethno-" component is documented by various extensions of traditional ethnographic methods and the close attention to the sociocultural context of language use, which includes an understanding of specific linguistic activities as embedded in and constitutive of locally organized and locally interpretable events. (...) None of the events implied by or referred to in the fono speeches [analyzed in this book] could be understood without lengthy conversations with knowledgeable participants. Such conversations were always departing from or centering on detailed transcripts of the actual talk produced at the fono (...) The "pragmatic" part of "ethnopragmatic" is meant to invoke a long tradition of study of the

connection between language and context as defined in a number of disciplines, including philosophy, linguistics, semiotics, psychology, and anthropology (Duranti 1994, 167–8)

In the decade that followed the publication of *From Grammar to Politics*, I became occupied with writing a lengthy textbook and editing a number of volumes focused on the representation of the state of the art in linguistic anthropology. In these projects I found myself performing a difficult balancing act between providing my own view of linguistic anthropology and fairly representing the theoretical and methodological diversity that characterizes the field.

In the last few years, however, I have returned to the concept of ethnopragmatics (Duranti 2007) and to the study of agency that originally motivated it. In so doing, I have expanded the original notion of agency used in Duranti (1994) to include, in addition to its linguistic representation (e.g., through grammar and lexicon), its enactment in interaction[2]. In this enterprise, my goal has been to integrate my interest in the pragmatic force of language with insights taken from social theorists like Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu, as well as from phenomenologists like Edmund Husserl and Emmanuel Levinas (Duranti 2009a).

Toward a universal characterization of agency in languages

After reviewing the work on agency done by both linguists interested in universals of language and social theorists interested in universals of human action, I proposed a working definition of agency that could be used to talk about both language and other forms of social action. Here is a slightly revised version of the definition I provided in Duranti (2001, 2004).

> Entities are said to have agency, if they (1) have some degree of control over their own behavior, (2) engage in actions that affect other entities (and sometimes their own) and (3) are evaluated from a practical, aesthetic, and moral point of view for what they do and how they do it.

This definition is based on a number of assumptions. One of them

is the idea that, although agency involves causation, like when someone succeeds at making someone else do something (e.g., pass the salt, answer a question, tell a story, laugh, cry, come to the table, or go for a walk), not any kind of causation would do. A crucial quality of agentive entities is whether they are believed to have control over their actions. This quality in turn is associated (but not in a unique way) with the exposure to the range of practical, aesthetic, and moral evaluations of which human beings are capable.

The inclusion of the assessment of the moral aspect of our doings I borrowed from a number of authors, including Charles Taylor, who claimed that "to be a full human agent, to be a person or a self in the ordinary meaning, is to exist in a space defined by distinctions of worth." (1985, 3) Aesthetic evaluation is a dimension of speaking that is highlighted in Richard Bauman's (1975) idea that to perform with language (as verbal artists do) means to assume responsibility for the way in which we carry out the task of using language. This idea can be easily extended to other modes of action, e.g., music, dance, and any of the visual arts. More importantly, it can also extend to everyday situations of all kinds. In the most routine and mundane exchanges, for example, greetings, a great deal of care is placed on the ways in which they are carried out, including their timing, rhythm, speed, length, intonation, embodiment, and, of course, content. Many of these attributes are usually thought of as qualities of artistic performances even though artistic performances themselves may be stylizations of ordinary activities.

The inclusion of a 'practical' evaluation of what people do as agents is meant to recognize our routine practical engagement with social tasks, tools, and the people who populate our social and mental life. Practical here must be understood in a number of ways. First, as used by phenomenologists (e.g. Husserl 1982), it is meant to be in opposition to "theoretical" or reflexive. It is our ordinary way of being involved in a world that we do not question. "Practical" also refers to our interest in how a given action is oriented toward solving a problem. This practical concern is made apparent in everyday narrative activity (e.g. at the dinner table), where those who collaborate in the telling act in ways similar to "detectives" working on a case (Ochs, Smith and Taylor 1989). Furthermore, "practical" refers to the

fact that we have a *practical interest* in getting things done (by ourselves and by others), that is, we *care* about what ends up happening as a result of our doings (including our sayings) (Heidegger 1962). We are not neutral observers of a world that rolls in front of our eyes. Language itself, as a medium for the representation of our world of experience, is not a neutral medium either (Bakhtin 1981, 294).

In my previous work I suggested that the above definition of agency lends itself to be interpreted along two dimensions, namely, the representation or encoding of agency and its performance or enacting. It turns out that these two dimensions are intimately related and at times difficult to separate. The analytical struggle to separate them is itself part of the challenge that any ethnopragmatic enterprise faces.

In the next section, I will discuss the encoding of agency cross-linguistically. Although Austin (1975, 99) indicated that "making an identification or giving a description" is one of the acts that are performed in saying something, the grammar of how identifications and descriptions are done has not been a traditional focus of speech act theory. My work, starting with *From Grammar to Politics*, is a way to fulfill the promise of a pragmatics that looks into grammar itself and does so with a universalistic as well as an ethnographic attitude.

The encoding of agency

At least since Fillmore's (1968) proposal for a semantically based syntax, in which such notions as "Agent" and "Instrument" play a major role, we have known that there is variation in the ways in which agency is represented in different languages as well as in the same language across situations. When we examine the encoding of agency cross-linguistically, we find that there are some substantial universals, including (1) *all languages have ways of encoding agency through their grammar and lexicon* and (2) *all languages have ways of omitting or mitigating agency*. Taken together (1) and (2) mean that speakers can choose among a range of shades or degrees of agency for any given situation, from explicit mentions of who did what to whom all the way to the omitting of agents altogether even when speakers and listeners know that agents were involved in the

action that is being described. Omission of agents in discourse is realized grammatically in a number of ways, including agentless passives—for languages that have recognizable passive constructions. Sentences like *the food was eaten* and *the man was killed* have been studied a great deal by linguists who have been interested in whether these structures are universal and in how to formally represent what is being understood by hearers. An ethnopragmatic perspective adds an interest in the contexts in which such constructions are found and in the actions that are either inferred or produced by their use in those contexts. For example, the analysis of a sentence like *the bill was vetoed* becomes amenable to an ethnopragmatic analysis when we add the information that (i) it was produced by a Republican member of the U.S. Congress, (ii) this candidate was running for reelection, (iii) the year of the political campaign was 1996, (iv) the omitted agent was the Democratic U.S. President at the time, namely, Bill Clinton; and (v) both speaker and audience knew that Clinton was the one who had vetoed the bill.[3]

Another universal in the representation of agency across languages is that *all languages have ways of incrementing the level of agency*. The increase of agency can be done with so-called metaphorical extensions, through which agency can be assigned to entities that otherwise might not qualify for the definition of agency provided above. For example, the rent of an apartment can be said to "jump to record highs" (Duranti 2004) or a fire can be said to "force people to evacuate," as in the following sentence from a newspaper in Spanish: *El incendio (...) obligó a evacuar a los 3.500 vecinos que viven en el núcleo urbano de Macaneo* (El Diario Vasco, 15 August 2003). When we examine metaphorical extensions cross-linguistically, we find that languages vary in the extent to which they allow to increase the level of agency for certain types of referents or participants in an event. For example, whereas English can treat instruments like agents by assigning them to the Subject role of transitive verbs—as in *the key opened the door*—this is not possible in languages like Samoan, where the noun phrase corresponding to *the key* could not become a Subject and would instead remain marked as an instrumental phrase (Duranti 2005, 2007). If we momentarily accept the hypothesis that putting the instrument in the Subject position, via syntactic analogy, constitutes a potential claim

of agency (that is, the key is said to "do" what a person usually "does"), we can further hypothesize that some languages (e.g., English) are more permissive in the representation of agency whereas other languages are more conservative. An ethnopragmatic approach asks whether these differences correspond to different conceptualizations of human agency and different interpretive practices.

Overall, these generalizations and hypotheses suggest that the encoding of agency is itself an issue that speakers must attend to when reporting a past event or speaking about current or future actions. This means that people are accountable not only for what they do but also for how they describe what they and others have done, are doing, or will be doing. This was anticipated in Fillmore's (1977, 1985) work on the importance of linguistic "frames" and "scenes" as well as in Harvey Sacks's (1992) interest in how speakers come to interactionally "formulate" descriptions (see also Schegloff 1972). An ethnopragmatic approach adds to these earlier discussions a fine-grained analysis of grammatical types matched with the contexts of their use.

When we combine the ethnopragmatic perspective with a phenomenological analysis of how speakers arrive at defining human participation in event, we are given a chance to return to the notion of intentionality, albeit in a different way from the way it was first introduced within speech act theory.

Rethinking intentionality and agency

I originally left intentions out of the definition of agency as described above because of the ambiguity of the term as used in discussions of language. More recently, by returning to the writings of Husserl and some of his students and interpreters, I have come to accept the idea that in addition to local ideologies of intentions and of reading other minds there exists a universal level of intentionality that can and should be used in the analysis of any kind of social interaction. This kind of pan-human intentionality co-exists with and informs other, culture- and context-specific notions and comes into play in the encoding of agency mentioned above. However, both theoretical and empirical distinctions must be made regarding the interplay

of intentionality and agency.

As articulated in Husserl's writings and captured in English by the term "aboutness," this most general type of intentionality is the property that our mental or physical acts have to be directed toward something, to be always *about* something. Through reflection on our own actions and the careful observation of the actions of others, we come to realize that while directing their attention to their surrounding world humans are always engaged in the meaningful constitution of the contents (and contexts) of their external and internal life. We do so, to use one of Husserl's concepts, through all kinds of *modifications* (Husserl 1982, 1989), that is, transformations of what comes to us through our senses (Duranti 2009b). Through these modifications, our attention is directed or redirected to something *as* an interpreted phenomenon of some kind. For example, through an intentional modification we see two dots in the middle of a circle *as* two "eyes" of a "face." In some cases, we become aware of these transformations, like when we find ourselves reinterpreting a just-heard sound as the first note of a familiar song. These modifications are key components in the constitution of our environment into a meaningful world[4]. Although we engage in modifications whenever we "read" our physical surrounding, e.g. as a familiar place full of known objects, and therefore language is not necessary for an intentional modification to occur, it can play an important role in bringing about certain modifications, even when it is one among a number of co-existing semiotic resources. For example, when music students are told to "listen" to how a professional musician does something, they are being directed to that musician's playing with the expectations that they will be able to hear it as an example of a (particular) type of playing music, e.g., as the way in which jazz—as opposed to another kind of music—is played (Duranti 2009b). Similarly, through talk and other semiotic resources (e.g., photos, drawings), defense lawyers may try to get the jury to see a given piece of evidence as something different from what suggested by the prosecutor. For example, as argued by Charles Goodwin, in the (first) "Rodney King trial," defense lawyers tried to get the jury to see what the world had come to think of as the brutal beating of Rodney King as something altogether different, namely, "a very disciplined and controlled effort to take King into custody." (Goodwin

2009, 463)

The study of the development of a "professional vision" or "a professional ear" reinforces the phenomenologists' idea that we are always actively involved in the meaningful constitution of our surrounding world. In giving meaning to objects, people, and all kinds of phenomena that we experience, we are engaged in actions that affect other entities and sometimes ourselves. Since this ability to affect others (and ourselves) is one of the properties I ascribed to agency in the definition provided above, we might be tempted to identify intentionality with agency. Our agency would then coincide with our ability to be "meaning-givers."

But the definition of agency provided above includes more than affecting other entities. It also includes the qualities of (i) having control and (ii) being the object of practical, moral, and aesthetic evaluations. These two (interrelated) conditions do not always obtain when we simply or routinely assign meaning to objects and events. This can be explained through what Husserl (1982: 53) called the "natural attitude" (*natürliche Einstellung*): we inhabit a world that "is there for me not only as a world of mere things, but also with the same immediacy as a *world of objects with values, a world of goods, a practical world.*" In other words, in most cases we do not have control over our interpretation of the world—a point also made by Edward Sapir (1927) and Benjamin Lee Whorf (1941). The world is "there" first and foremost as a world full of meanings, a meaningful world. We "naturally" interpret our surroundings, with its places, objects, and people, according to hermeneutic practices that have been shaped through countless previous encounters, hearings, and sayings. For example, if we know how to read English orthography and we see a printed English word, we immediately interpret it as a "word" and not as some dots and lines with spaces in-between and around it—it takes work to reach this kind of de-familiarization (as artists know). Similarly, when we know a language and we hear it spoken we do not first just hear "sounds" or "noises," we immediately hear "speech," that is, we recognize something being *said* by someone. This means that our everyday, practical way of relating to our own language (or languages) is to interpret it immediately and unconsciously, give it a meaning, and not question it. It is thus difficult to "turn off" our understanding of a language that we know, to transform

it into "noise." (Husserl believed that we can undo our habitual ways of understanding the world through a "suspension" or *epoché* of our "natural attitude"). There are, however, certain contexts in which interpretations are contested and speakers are forced to become aware of what they *habitually* do (Hanks 1996). In these cases, what seemed "natural" is framed as "cultural" or even "personal" and a practical, moral, or aesthetic evaluation of the meaning-constituting act is produced. Under such circumstances, speakers are made accountable for something that they may claim to be an unconscious, unquestioned and unquestionable way of communicating. Although all kinds of speaking acts can be subjected to such scrutiny, some of the most visible in the current public sphere are those that are said to be the manifestation of a person's or a group's prejudice, racism, or gender discrimination. Linguistic anthropologists' and sociolinguists' analyses of covert racist discourse are examples of the effort to expose the ideological side of what appear to be "natural" ways of speaking (e.g., Hill 2008; Kulick 2003). In these cases, the habitual intentionality of someone's language—for example, English speakers' systematic use of Spanish words like *mañana* and *macho* with a negative connotation—is bracketed and the conditions that make it socially possible are questioned.

This brief discussion suggests that although Husserlian intentionality and agency, as defined in this article, are related, they need to be analytically distinguished and their relevance must be empirically tested. In other words, we should not reduce agency to intentionality or vice versa.

Conclusions

In this chapter I have briefly reviewed an approach to the study of language, interaction, and culture that in the early 1990s I called "ethnopragmatics." In so doing, I have re-examined the anthropological critique of the use of intentions in describing human interpretive practices, the context-creating force of the encoding of agency in discourse, and the relationship between intentionality and agency. Each of these topics deserves much more space than I have been able to give it here. I do hope, however, to have demonstrated the importance of pursuing these issues with an open mind and from a historical perspective. Too often what has

been characterized as the "western" way of thinking about meaning has turned out to be a caricatured view of western philosophy. It is not difficult to show that the so-called "continental philosophers" of the first part of the twentieth century have much to contribute to an anthropological understanding of human ways of thinking, speaking, and acting. Among those philosophers, I have here championed Edmund Husserl. His ideas continue to inspire me to reconsider earlier claims while aiming for a theory of social action that is pan-human and yet sensitive to local understanding and communicative practices.

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Notes

1. I thank Anna Corwin and Robin Conley for their comments on an earlier draft of this article.

2. Due to space limitations, I will not discuss here the performance of agency and what I called "Ego-affirming agency" in earlier publications (Duranti 2001, 2004).

3. The sentence is taken from a transcript of a political debate during the 1995-96 political campaign for the U.S. Congress (see Duranti 2007).

4. In Duranti (2009b) I discuss the similarities between Husserl's notion of intentional modification and Wittgenstein's (1958) notion of "aspect seeing."