

The Magic Lecture: Where Everything Finally Comes Together

Alessandro Duranti

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Introduction¹

There is no question that for most university instructors undergraduate teaching is the real challenge. In general, it is easier to teach graduate students because they are already committed to the field and are eager to learn from us. With undergraduate students it's different. They may have no background in our discipline and no commitment to become experts of it. Things get even more challenging when one teaches a large undergraduate course that fulfills a general education requirement. In this case, one may have pre-meds and other science majors who are not used to reading the kinds of texts that are common in socio-cultural and linguistic anthropology. In my case, when I teach my lower division course on linguistic anthropology two additional complications are produced by my choice of textbooks and my teaching style. I use a reader in linguistic anthropology and a couple of monographs that provide examples of in-depth ethnographic studies with an emphasis on communication (from face-to-face conversation to music performance). This means that I don't use a textbook that lays down a map of the field of study or provides easily memorized definitions. Students have to master material that was not originally written for them. This makes it difficult for them to know what they are supposed to pay attention to or remember out of an article or even a paragraph. The second complication is my teaching style. I like to keep the structure of my lectures open enough to allow me to step out of the plan of the day, to venture into a topic that was not in the syllabus, or into collective problem solving, for example on the ways in which jazz musicians organize the sequence of their solos in a particular recording (I used to start my first lecture by playing Charlie Parker's "Blues For Alice" and ask the students to "take some notes" – no pun intended). These activities are often perceived as "digressions" or "confusing" and result in the perception by a good number of students that I am not very organized or that I tend to "go off on tangents." Since from my own point of view, I am incredibly organized (check my web site!), it took me years to figure out (i) how to make sense of the students' reactions and (ii) what to do about them. Once I stopped being defensive and listened more carefully to what the students were saying, I realized that they actually liked the content of the course and me as a teacher but were just anxious the whole time. The course and I seemed not only "different," but too unpredictable. It was then that I had the idea of a "magic lecture" to conclude the course.

Constructing a myth to create order out of potential confusion

I decided that starting from the first week the students needed something to look forward to, something that would reassure them that there would be a way of pulling things together at the end, despite the lack of a textbook, the strange terminology, and the apparently unconnected topics. Although I knew that *they* would have to be the ones to pull things together, I would tell them that *I* would be the one to do it. They had nothing to worry about, I would say, because in my final lecture, everything would "magically come together." It was, of course, the construction of a *myth*. We anthropologists *study* myths, why couldn't I *create* one?

My final “magic” lecture would not just be about some of the themes of the course. It would also hint at the big questions of human existence, the meaning of life, and the mission of anthropology in the contemporary world. It would hopefully give students a sense of the whole, or rather a sense of a bigger enterprise within which to make sense of my version of “culture and communication.” The frame provided by the final lecture would compensate for the inconsistencies and smooth out inevitable bumps of the course, a course with no glossary at the end of the book, no keys to the exercises, no previous ground on which to build except commitment, curiosity, and ultimately shared humanity. A course with no safety net, like in a circus from yesteryear.

With these goals in mind, I found myself wondering whether I had the skills to deliver a message that could stand up to the expectations built over the course. My solution was storytelling. The main themes of the course would be revisited through a number of personal narratives. I knew that when everything else fails, a good story can still make a point. Most importantly, a good story provides level ground where people can start as equals because everyone can follow a good story. The students had read about narrative and knew that it is a way to problem-solve about life experiences. The stories in the final lecture would be a way of problem-solving about the course itself, its themes, its connections, and its relevance to other domains.

So my magic lecture became story-telling time. Like *The Dreamtime of Australian aborigines*, my stories reached into the past to make sense of the present.

The first story is about names. It is meant to show that names acquire their meaning through the actions of the people who use them. Names have referents (the people they identify) but also values. By their power to evoke memories and emotions, they help shape what we do and who we are. A discussion of names, in other words, can be a good way to test an anthropological approach to language as a classificatory system.

Story number 1: How I got to be (wrongly) named after my uncle

This story is about when I was a little boy growing up in Rome. It’s about the time when I was too little to go school and too old to stay at home. My parents left me with my mother’s mother, Maria, who had a stand in an open market located in an affluent Roman neighborhood. She sold all kinds of clothes: men’s shirts and pants, women’s blouses and skirts, and also socks, stockings, and underwear. I loved to be at the market with my grandmother, free to run around, greet everyone, and get little presents from her many friends, especially from the vendors who sold fruit or bread sticks and loved to contribute to keeping my arms and legs as chubby as possible.

My favorite part of the day was to go inside the big cart where my grandmother’s merchandise was stored and fall asleep on top of shirts, pants, towels, and bras. Of course when I woke up after my afternoon nap the shirts didn’t look as neat and tidy as they had before I slept on top of them, but my grandmother never complained. She never said, “Be careful, you’re messing up the shirts!”. Maybe her customers didn’t care too much. For one thing, as we discovered after she died, many of them owed her money. She left a book full of nicknames matched with sums of money. But nobody else in the family knew the people behind those nicknames, and therefore the debts were never collected.

So, there you have it. It's already a story about names. The names my grandmother gave the people who owed her money made her into a very generous person all the way to the grave. By giving them those special names she was giving away her goods. But she was also implying that human relations mean more than money. These people were special to her, like their names. By being a name-giver, my grandmother took on a special role, which gave her a special power. She was the only one who could identify the people behind those nicknames, and hence she was the sole judge of their dealings with her, including their debts. That's the way she was: strong-minded and proud, but also protective and generous. Maybe that's why everyone at the market liked me. Since they liked my grandmother, how could then not like her little grandson? When I passed, they would call me and ask me questions, or I would hear people tell each other, "You know that boy? That's Maria's grandson. Isn't he handsome?"

But although everyone knew me, they didn't know me by my real name. They all called me "Maurizio," which is the name of my mother's brother, my grandmother's only son. Being called "Maurizio" used to get me upset. I kept correcting the people in the market. "Maurizio is my uncle," I would say. "My name is "Sandro" – short for Alessandro. Day after day, I spent time and effort trying to teach people to call me by my name. They would smile and nod, and the next day as I walked by they would call out "Maurizio, dove vai?" (Maurizio, where are you going?) "Maurizio, come stai?" (Maurizio, how are you?)

I never detected any teasing in this misnaming practice. "Maurizio" was just the way they thought of me. I was a younger version of my uncle, who was seventeen years older than me. I reminded them of him and I guess that's how I got his name.

Years later, after my grandmother had died, whenever I met her old friends -- the owner of the bookstore across the street or the owner of the café where I used to go before school to have a cappuccino and a croissant -- they all showed great affection for me. They gave me discounts or even free goods. They also called the other people in the store to show them how much I had grown. If someone didn't recognize me right away, my grandmother's friend would say, "C'mon don't you remember Maria's grandson, Maurizio?"

By that time, I had accepted that I was "Maurizio" for my grandmother's friends. I realized that it was a sign of affection; it was an index of past relationships that were made live again. I was carrying a family name, it was like a title I had inherited. I was two people at the same time, two sets of social relations, two worlds of emotions and aspirations, two sets of experiences fused in one. Perhaps when they saw me they saw my uncle at my age and they remembered my grandmother when she was younger, or perhaps they remembered their own younger years, their past thoughts, worries, and dreams.

All of that in a name? How could it be?" you might ask. Well, it wasn't just the name that did all of that. It was the practice of *using* that name. The name didn't really mean anything by itself. It wasn't even mine. But my grandmother's friends made that name meaningful. They transformed the wrong name into the right one. They poured life into it. It took me a long time to understand this.

In fact, I didn't really understand it until I went to Samoa to do fieldwork for my dissertation research. It was then that I learned that two Samoan chiefs can "share" the same name. This means, among other things, that when one of them does something great, the other benefits. Similarly, when one does something wrong the other is blamed as well. I realized then that when people at the market called me by my uncle's name, I was in part my uncle, and I was benefiting from the affection that those people had bestowed on my uncle before me. That affection was part of their relationship with my grandmother, my uncle, and me.

This story allows me to go back to the questions that some students ask me during my office hours: Why did you decide to become a linguistic anthropologist?

The answer for me is: because where else would I find a science that would give me the tools to start unraveling what was going on in the market between me and my grandmother's friends? Linguistic anthropology can let you see how and why names acquire additional meanings, full of memories and emotions. It is a science that honors language as a code and as a practice. It documents and explains the conditions when a wrong name can be right.

In this perspective, language is not just a mirror of reality or a phylogenetically inherited device to describe independently established entities and events. Language is also itself a reality, simultaneously predictable and unpredictable, full of regularities and stereotypes and yet also available for new rules and new meanings. Language is both formulaic and creative, sometimes in the same act.

And language has a tremendous force, a power to define, refine, and redefine who we are. I like to further illustrate this point with another story, this time taken from my experience in Samoa. It's a story about the identity of a speechmaker and the linguistic features that make up such an identity, even under the most unusual conditions. It is also a story about those aspects of language that linguists usually leave out of their theoretical discussion, namely, "paralinguistic" features like loudness, timing, pitch, rhythm. It turns out that, in certain contexts, these features matter much more than other aspects of language, including the ability to speak fluently. In this story, they are the properties out of which artistic talent is identified and recognized.

Story number 2: How to acquire the identity of a Samoan speechmaker

During one of my stays in Western Samoa several years ago, Larry Konner, a friend of mine who is a Hollywood screenwriter, and his son Jeremy, my son Marco's best friend, came to spend a week in the village with us. The local Samoan pastor, Rev. Fa'atau'oloa Mauala, and the chiefs of his congregation decided that they would give a little kava ceremony in our honor the night before our departure. In preparation, I made my friend Larry practice what to do when he was served kava. He had to hold the cup in front of his face and shout, "Soifua!"

The night of the kava ceremony came. After a big dinner with fresh fish, taro, and baked bananas, the orators started to compete for the honor of delivering the *lāuga*, the formal speech. My old friend Tāvō won the contest. When he was done, while people were saying *mâlô!* 'congratulations' to him, he turned to me and said, as if I didn't know, "Now it's your turn."

I started. My *lâuga* style was a bit rusty after several years with no practice, but I could still remember a few appropriate metaphors, and I certainly remembered the way to start and the way to end. So I managed through. In fact, the smiles on people's face confirmed that I had performed according to their best expectations. Alesana, the white man, the *pâlagi*, still remembered. It was a sign of respect, of *fa`aaloalo*. Tâvô seemed pleased as well. Then the kava ceremony started and kava was served. First the pastor, then the highest chief, then me (the speechmaker from the visiting party), then Tâvô, then it was going to be Larry's turn. For a moment, the ritual came to a halt because the kava caller didn't know how to announce Larry's cup, given that he didn't have a title, that is, a Samoan name carrying power and history with it. But invention and creativity can exist even in the middle of the most formal of events, and someone came up with the name "Tusitala," which literally means "writer" and is the name Samoans use to refer to Louis Stevenson, who lived in Samoa during the last years of his life. My friend Larry followed my instructions perfectly. He held up his cup in front of his eyes and, staring ahead, shouted "Soifua!" After a brief silence, people started to laugh hysterically, openly breaking the serious frame of the ceremony. They seemed both surprised and pleased. But I realized that they were also taken by the quality of Larry's voice, which was not only strong and loud, but deep, like the voice of the best Samoan speechmakers. When the kava ceremony was over, Tâvô looked at me and said, "Next time you come to Samoa, bring along your friend Larry. You, Alesana, can be the chief. Larry will be your speechmaker."

This time I was the one to be shocked. It didn't matter that I had spent hundreds of hours talking to orators and transcribing speeches. It didn't matter that I had actually delivered a whole *lâuga* and my friend had only said the word "soifua." What mattered was that Larry had a deep and powerful voice. That made him into a potentially great orator. It was a sign that the power of the gods were with him, that he had what is known throughout Oceania as *mana*, the power that comes from the ancestors and is reactivated by our own accomplishments. With such power, even a short speech can be great, even a single word can evoke the connection between earth and heaven, can express the fragility of human existence, and activate the immutable strength of eternal values.

This story confirms what linguistic anthropologists say about verbal art, namely, that a verbal artist is accountable not only for *what* he says but also for *how* he says it. Natural qualities and socialization must come together in the act of speaking as a public performance that is subject to immediate evaluation. That's why we must record actual performances, transcribe what people say and do, and find out what they think about what was being said. Our intuitions alone can't do the job.

But the story about what makes up the identity of a Samoan orator is also a story about a cross-cultural encounter involving me, my friend, Larry, and our Samoan hosts. Anthropology itself is often talked about as an encounter with the "other;" sometimes "The Other" is written with a capital "O" to convey not only that the idea is important but that it is also somewhat beyond our reach and control, somewhat metaphysical. Even though the term "encounter" gives a sense of equality, it can imply hidden stories of conquest and extermination. The encounters of history often bleed. Therefore, to make the word "encounter" work for us, we must problematize it. We must start by recognizing that an encounter, depending on when it takes place, can be quite exciting, but also anxiety producing or even dangerous. Minimally speaking, every encounter

implies the possibility of misunderstanding. This applies to our encounters with our students. We find ourselves inside of a classroom with people who usually have quite different backgrounds, different expectations, who grew up speaking a language different from the one we spoke as children. Like Larry and me in Samoa, we are sometimes judged not for what we know but how we deliver the message, how convincing and secure we sound, how well we match the students' expectations about what a teacher looks and sounds like.

Too often we take for granted that our audience has the same cultural background that we do. Too often we are disappointed that students do not know the name of a scholar or of an artist that we consider familiar. Everyone is connected to so many people and so many sources of information through personal media that we forget that the overabundance of wanted and unwanted connections does not guarantee mutual understanding. The threat of finding ourselves lost – at an intersection, in a classroom, in a paragraph, or in the middle of a speech – is ever-present. We need to remember that learning needs solid ground and, most importantly, that the new can be accessed only if we stand firmly on something old and the familiar. To illustrate this point, I will go into my third and last story. For the most magic of all magic acts, that is, for real learning to take place, we need the most special circumstances. The most ideal time and place is not easy to create in the classroom, and yet it is reachable, if we make ourselves open to it, if we travel far enough, metaphorically first and non-metaphorically later. And that's what my last story is about.

Story number 3: The perfect Spanish lesson

When I went to Peru a few summers ago – actually, it was summer here in Los Angeles, but winter in Puno, 4,000 meters on the altiplano, near Lake Titicaca – I first acted as if I knew Spanish. It was a premeditated plot. Before leaving home I kept telling people that I was going to Peru and wanted to work with Aymara speakers – a language I didn't know -- but I was a bit concerned because even my Spanish wasn't very good and I was going to need it to interact with Aymara speakers. Everyone said, "Don't worry. You'll figure it out right away. You're Italian. It will be easy for you." After a few of these exchanges, I decided that I did know Spanish. Or rather, that I would just act as if I did. After all, Spanish could be thought of as a dialect of Latin and therefore, with the right imperialist attitude (I am a Roman after all), I could say that Spanish is a dialect of Italian. And that's what I did. From the moment I arrived I acted as if I could speak Spanish. The amazing thing is that it worked. People treated me as a conversational partner. I understood directions and I did manage to use Spanish to work with two Aymara speakers, Susana and her husband, Javier. They never complained about my Spanish. When I made a mistake they either ignored it or just repeated the sentence with the corrected forms. It was probably to my advantage that Peru is a country with many multilingual speakers. No one cared about my accent except to notice that it was not like the one that North Americans have.

As I started to build confidence and learned a few more words, however, I also became more aware of my limitations. The more I knew the more I realized that I didn't know enough. For example, I could not be a full conversational partner because my story telling abilities were limited. To tell a story you need to know the past tense. And I didn't know all the inflections, especially for the irregular verbs, which are, not by accident, the most frequently used. For the same reason, especially at dinner time, as we moved away from academic topics, I would miss a word here and word there, and suddenly I had missed the punchline of a joke. So I lived in a

paradox. My Spanish *was* improving but I was feeling more limited and frustrated. As I wanted to communicate with my new Peruvian friends, I found myself lost in the midst of impossibly long paraphrases just to avoid a verb form or a noun I didn't know. Or I would fake understanding in order not to stop the flow of a conversation that everyone else was enjoying so much.

By the time I left Puno and returned to Lima, I was ready to enroll in an advanced Spanish class at UCLA. The cab driver left me in front of my hotel with the promise that he would return to pick me up at 1:00 in the morning to take me to the airport (he never came but another driver showed up in his place). So I had a few hours to spend in Lima and, after a hot bath, the first in two weeks, I ventured out in the midst of busy streets. I was in Miraflores, a residential area full of shops, cafes, restaurants and fancy hotels. It felt good to be able to breath normally again, now that I had returned to sea level. I had asked the people at the front desk where to find a bookstore. They gave me a map, the names of a couple of streets and I was off, no longer a linguistic anthropologist, just a regular, eager tourist. After a long walk, I arrived at the Pacific Ocean. It felt strange to think that it was the same ocean I see everyday in Los Angeles when I drive on Pacific Coast Highway. Even the palisades looked the same. In fact, for a moment I felt I was on Ocean Avenue in Santa Monica. I suddenly was on top of a huge shopping center with Tony Roma, The Hard Rock Café and a theater complex playing 12 American movies. After checking my e-mail account at a computer in the mall, I left without even looking for the bookstore. I walked back to the hotel. Across the street I saw a big sign that said "Jazz Club" and underneath, in smaller letters (in Spanish, of course), "opens at 8pm." I looked at my watch. It was 7:00. I returned to my room, lay on the bed, and fell asleep. I woke up at 9:00 and, within minutes, was standing in front of the Jazz Club again. I walked up some narrow steps and entered a room filled with people sitting at small, round tables. A young man in front of an easel with dates on it was speaking to the group. He held a trumpet in his left hand. I sat down. A waitress came and took my order of a beer and a sandwich. I realized that I had happened on a class. The man was lecturing to an audience of mostly young people. Some had cases next to them in the shapes of guitars and various wind instruments; they were obviously music students. There were also some older people who would sometimes make comments, some of them with a strong American accent.

The waitress came back with the beer and the sandwich. As I started to relax, the topic of the lecture became clear: it was about Louis Armstrong, his life and music. The lecturer – I discovered later that his name was Gabriel Alegria and that he visited L.A. once in a while to play in clubs – spoke with passion about Armstrong. He played a tape of one of his recordings and then gave a live demonstration with his trumpet of what "vibrato" meant, pointing out that it had been out of fashion for a while ("Miles Davis would never used it" he said). He also explained what it meant to swing, drawing notes on the white board and then giving an example with his trumpet. But his lecture wasn't just about music, it was also about American society and Armstrong as a cultural icon, an ambassador of Black American culture, highly admired by Europeans.

I ordered another beer and another sandwich. I was listening to the young musician talk, and I could see images in my mind of Louis playing, Louis and President Roosevelt, Louis and the guitarist Django Reinhardt in Paris, Louis singing "Mack the Knife" with the singer Lotte Lenya.

I was matching the talk with the sounds and with the images in my head. And I was enjoying every moment of it. I was happy. I was home away from home. And it was then that it struck me. I suddenly realized what had been happening. I had been listening to Spanish for over half an hour and not once had I stopped to search for the meaning of a word or phrase. I had completely immersed myself in the sound of Spanish sentences as if they were English or Italian. Through a familiar topic and a music I love, Spanish had become another language of mine. I had found the ideal situation not only to recognize and practice words I knew but also to listen to new words whose meaning became immediately transparent, with no need for a dictionary or translator. I suddenly came to the realization that I had found the perfect Spanish lesson!

It is not too often that we find the perfect Spanish lesson or the perfect English lesson or the perfect Anthropology lesson. And yet, that's what we strive for. To lift our students away from their own thoughts and mobile connections, to invite them to come out of their sleep deprivation and carry them into an intellectual (and yes, magic) world where they can feel so secure and comfortable that even the foreign words and concepts we use in our introductory anthropology courses will become immediately transparent. When the perfect anthropology lesson kicks in, they won't even know it's happening. They will just need to lean back and enjoy the music, I mean the lesson. I mean the magic. The music, the lesson, the magic. One. Two. Three. Hah!

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