The audience as co-author: An introduction

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The papers in this issue all share a view of verbal communication as an achievement, that is, as the collective activity of individual social actors whose final product (viz. the resulting 'text' or speech event) is qualitatively different from the sum of its parts (viz. individual utterances by individual speakers).

Such a perspective can be traced back to such diverse scholars as J. L. Austin, Mikhail Bakhtin, Bronislaw Malinowski, Ludwig Wittgenstein, among others. What these scholars share is sensitivity to and analytical interest in the *activity of speaking*. In such a perspective, speech is a form of labor – to use Rossi-Landi's (1983) term – which requires the coordination of several actors around a task (cf. Leont'ev, 1981). Speech is *public*, intersubjective by nature. Such a position is consistent with a psychology in which higher psychological processes in the individual have their origin in social interaction (cf. Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1985) and with the instrumental view of linguistic signs advocated by Buehler, Malinowski and Vygotsky in the late 1920's. It was only a few years later that Wittgenstein started to raise, in his Cambridge lectures, a series of fundamental objections to the study of language outside specific activities (or 'language games') and eventually arrived at the formulation of the so-called 'private language argument' (cf. Wittgenstein, 1953/1958; Kripke, 1982). The idea was that a code (or a grammar) cannot be contained in someone's mind, or, to paraphrase Michael Holquist (1983), 'no one owns it'. A system of signs or what appears as rule-governed behavior does not belong to the individual but to the community.

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There are some far-reaching consequences of this position. Methodologically, it implies that a thorough knowledge of what constitutes the linguistic system cannot be attained by investigating individual competences, as suggested by Chomsky (1986), but must be studied by documenting particular acts of speaking (*actes de parole*) (cf. Labov's, 1972: 185-186, discussion of the Saussurean paradox). If it is others who ratify our 'grammar' and our communicative code (what something can mean, given a certain context), the system cannot be defined as an *a priori* set of rules or relationships (or conditions on rules) to be discovered. It is something that is partly constituted, that is, made real, possible, and meaningful, through its use by particular actors at particular times and places. The shared nature of the communicative system is two-sided: it is assumed, and at the same time must be realized, in concrete acts of verbal communication.

As shown by the papers in this issue, when we carefully examine the details of everday talk, we realize that Wittgenstein's 'private language argument' finds the strongest support in the doings of everyday life – in someone's backyard, in a church service, during a picnic, while singing a song – rather than in eloquent philosophical debates.

Wittgenstein's call for the community's testing and approval is best answered by looking at how speakers' acts are met by their interlocutors' responses. The fact that in some contemporary theories of verbal communication (cf. Searle, 1968, 1983) the speaker's intentions are the main or only source of 'meaning' may just be an extension of local (folk) theories of knowledge and social action that satisfy certain versions of current cognitive science programs (but cf. Rumelhart [to appear], for a different perspective). It can be easily shown that were one to start from different sociocultural premises and needs, the audience's support and understanding may, in fact, become a primary concern for the analyst. In my own work on Samoan speech acts (cf. Duranti, 1984), I found that if I wanted to explain how an orator could be accused of not keeping someone else's, i.e. a chief's, promise, I had to take into consideration local epistemologies of self and social action. This implied a reconsideration of Grice's notion of intentional meaning. According to this notion, for a speaker A to mean something by the utterance x, 'A must intend to induce by x a belief in an audience, and he must also intend his utterance to be recognized as so intended'. (Grice, 1957/1971: 441). Samoans often seem to ignore the speaker's alleged intentions and concentrate instead on the consequences of someone's words. Rather than going back to speculate on what someone 'meant to say' (a phrase that

cannot be translated into Samoan), participants in the speech event rely on the dynamics between the speaker's words and the ensuing circumstances (audience's response included) to assign interpretation. In some cases, the audience may be allowed to say more about what went on than the one who uttered the original utterance(s). Interpretation is not conceived as the speaker's privilege. On the contrary, it is based on the ability (and power) that others may have to invoke certain conventions, to establish links between different acts and different social personae. Meaning is collectively defined on the basis of recognized (and sometimes restated) social relationships. In discussing these facts, I found myself constructing (or reinventing) a local theory of interpretation that shared many of the positions held in the western tradition by such authors as Bakhtin, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein, among others (cf. Duranti, 1984, 1985a). It is within this tradition that mutual dependence between someone's words and the audience's response and interpretation is recognized and made a point of departure for any hermeneutic enterprise.

> In the actual life of speech, every concrete act of understanding is active: it assimilates the word to be understood into its own conceptual system filled with specific objects and emotional expressions, and is indissolubly merged with the response, with a motivated agreement or disagreement. To some extent, *primacy belongs to the response*, as the activating principle: it creates the ground for understanding, it prepares the ground for an active and engaged understanding. Understanding comes to fruition only in the response.
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> Understanding and response are dialectically merged and mutually condition each other; one is impossible without the other (emphasis added) (Bakhtin, 1981: 282, written in 1934–35).

> . . . understanding can go beyond the author's subjective act of meaning, and perhaps even necessarily and always goes beyond it. . . . as soon as we consider the appropriate model – for example, the understanding of historical actions, of historical events – we find ourselves in agreement. No one will assume that the subjective consciousness of the agent, or of the participant in the events, is commensurate with the historical significance of his actions. It is obvious to us that understanding the historical significance of an action presupposes that we do not restrict ourselves to the subjective plans, intentions, and dispositions of the agents. At least since Hegel's time it has been clear that history by its very nature does not have its primary focus in the self-knowledge of the individual, and it holds just as well for the experience of the art. I believe that this same insight must be applied even to the interpretation of texts whose informational sense is not open to an indeterminate explanation like the art work. Here too, as Husserl's critique of psycho-

logism had demonstrated, 'what is meant' is not a component of subjective inwardness (Gadamer, 1962/1976: 122).

In the last ten or fifteen years, similar points have been repeatedly made on the basis of empirical research on the sequential organization of talk (e.g. cf. Schegloff and Sacks, 1973; Schenkein, 1978; Streek, 1980) and on certain kinds of verbal and non-verbal ritual exchanges (cf. Bourdieu, 1977; Kochman, 1983).

The work done within conversation analysis has shown that even the apparently most ritualized acts of speaking, e.g. the beginning of telephone conversations, involve negotiations and must be cooperatively worked out (cf. Schegloff, to appear). When we get to less routinized verbal exchanges, e.g. story telling, we find that the form and content of talk is continuously reshaped by the co-participants, through their ability to create certain alignments and suggest or impose certain interpretations (cf. Goodwin, this issue).

In other cases, as shown in child language studies, the work of verbal interaction may be done cooperatively to such an extent that propositions are produced across turns and across speakers (cf. Ochs, Schieffelin and Platt, 1979). Cross-cultural research has more recently shown that, once a proposition has been uttered, authorship (viz. who said what) is defined on the basis of the local conventions for assigning responsibility and agency (cf. Schieffelin, 1979; Duranti, 1985b). Thus, in the Brethren church services discussed by Borker (this issue), the presence of the Spirit in the performance is established through the participants' coordinated ability to achieve *textual coherence* around traditional metaphors and symbols.

The co-construction of a sociocultural order that is both presupposed by and realized through talk is also discussed by Haviland (this issue) in his analysis of an interaction in a Zinecantan village, where the *multifunctional* nature of talk is exploited and acted through parallel and competing topics (e.g. calculating the cost of a ritual and joking with/about a young bystander). By exploiting the multi-party structure of the conversation and the differentiated access to the topics (viz. counting, engaging in a teasing exchange about marriage negotiations) the participants can speak to and for someone else as a way of speaking *through* him and to each other.

. . . in the midst of the joking and the planning, we see people concurrently adjusting their social relationships with one another: as corn-farmers and partners in a business venture; as kinsmen; as neighbors; and as members of a

corporate group that commands loyalty and segments the social universe into *kinds*. (Haviland, this issue)

To what extent can we rely on the speakers' intentions in trying to make sense of what is going on? Against Grice's (1971) prediction, it would seem that, in this case, the clear *recognition of the speaker's intentions* may be the last thing that the participants *intend* (cf. also DuBois's [to appear] discussion of cases in which no sender can even be talked about, let alone his or her intentions). The teasing and joking analyzed by Haviland can take place and relationships maintained precisely because the co-participants avoid the immediate identification of certain words with the speaker's intentions. It is the availability of multiple personae behind each speaker/hearer that makes the interaction possible and communication meaningful. This is a point that is often ignored in current discussions of speech act theory. Thus, Clark and Carlson (1982) rightly stress the need to recognize the informative function that certain utterances have with respect to hearers and bystanders – as opposed to addressees (cf. also Brenneis, 1978; Goffman, 1976; Goodwin, 1981, for discussion of different kinds of audiences) – but end up extending even further the speech act version of the 'intentional fallacy' (cf. Wimsatt and Beardsley, 1948). Not only might there be no way to know whether in fact the speaker *intends to inform* all participants of the illocutionary act that he is performing, but much of the ensuing interaction seems caused by how the participants' audience decide to interpret that act, regardless of the speaker's alleged intentions (cf. Duranti, 1984, 1986).

These and other facts suggest that to give the audience co-authorship is more than an ideological stand. It represents the awareness of a partnership that is necessary for an interaction to be sustained, but is often denied by analysts and participants alike. Speaker and audience are equals not simply because their roles are interchangeable – in fact, they may not be in some situations – but rather because every act of speaking is directed to and must be ratified by an audience. This is clearly recognized in the Breaking of Bread ceremony discussed by Borker (this issue), where the coherence and therefore authenticity of what performers say and do is judged and defined by the audience.

Talk, in fact, does not need to be *exchanged* between parties for us to say that communication was cooperatively achieved. The mere presence of an audience socially constitutes and ratifies the nature of a speech event (e.g. a sermon, a play, a class lecture, a story telling). An unsympathetic or unco-

operative audience can deeply affect the performance of any speech act, as any professional stage actor, who in principle repeats the same lines at every performance, can tell us. Furthermore, as Goodwin (this issue) reminded us, even in a theater, the audience has the option of creatively assigning new meanings to what is being said on the stage.

What this implies is that interpretation (of texts, sounds, etc.) is not a passive activity whereby the audience is just trying to figure out what the author meant to communicate. Rather, it is a way of making sense of what someone said (or wrote or drew) by linking it to a world or context that the audience can make sense of. The recipe for the interpretation of a text is never fully contained in the text. It could not be, in fact, for a number of reasons: first of all, because members of the audience must be given the freedom to make the author's agenda relevant to their own; second, because interpretation is itself an activity and as such depends on the context within which it takes place. When the context changes (audience included), interpretation will change accordingly. This means, among other things, that interpretation is a form of re-contextualization and as such can never fully recover the original content of a given act (although it can get pretty close to it). The hermeneutic circle is never completed because it must be drawn while space and time change; for this reason, the metaphor of a *spiral* would seem much more appropriate than the image of a circle (Michael Cole, p.c.). A similar argument was presented by Vološinov/Bakhtin and Wittgenstein in their respective criticism of Freud's theory of the interpretation of dreams (cf. Vološinov 1927/1976; Wittgenstein n.d. [1942]). The interpretation produced during analysis cannot provide the 'meaning' – in a causal sense, that is, the intentions, whether conscious or not – of the dream at the time of the dreaming. It provides a 'text' that makes sense within the narrower context of the interaction between the patient and the doctor and within the larger context of the plausibility of Freud's theory to the participants, viz. only some interpretations will be accepted as valid or sound by the analyst and by the patient.

When we, as ethnographers, bring the interaction we recorded to the printed page, we engage in a similar activity of recontextualization. That is inevitable. We set up a context for a new audience to judge and appreciate what went on around and through that text on some other occasion. Once we understand this, however, we do not come to the end of the process, we do not denounce the act of interpretation as impossible or inherently inadequate. We use the tools we have at our disposal (e.g. ethnography, analytical distinc-

tions, linguistic analysis, cross-cultural comparison) to recreate, at a different level, a complex and diverse picture where the organized diversity of everyday talk is maintained and highlighted rather than translated into monological forms of communication. In so doing, we must keep in mind Bakhtin's criticism of the inability of traditional stylistic analysis to appreciate the polyphonic nature of Dostoevsky's novels:

> ... [traditional] stylistic analysis is not oriented toward the novel as a whole, but only toward one or another of its subordinated stylistic unities. The traditional scholar bypasses the basic distinctive feature of the novel as a genre; he substitutes for it another object of study, and instead of novelistic style he actually analyzes something completely different. He transposes a symphonic (orchestrated) theme on to the piano keyboard. (Bakhtin, 1981: 263)

We present the papers in this issue with the hope that they will evoke at least part of the symphonic quality of verbal performance as realized in everyday life.

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