

# Sociolinguistics and Language Teaching

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## 9 *Interactional sociolinguistics*

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### **Introduction**

Interactional sociolinguistics is a theoretical and methodological perspective on language use that is based in linguistics, sociology, and anthropology. Because of these disciplinary roots, it shares the concerns of all three fields with language, society, and culture. Although speech act theory (Cohen, this volume), the ethnography of communication (Saville-Troike, this volume) and microethnography (Erickson, this volume) are also concerned with language, society, and culture, the approach discussed in this chapter is somewhat different in theory, method, origin, and focus (see Schiffrin, 1992, 1994, Chaps. 3 to 5).<sup>1</sup>

The discussion in this chapter begins with the contributions of the sociologist Erving Goffman (see Erickson, this volume). Goffman's analysis of face-to-face interaction provide an understanding of how language is situated in particular circumstances of social life and how it both reflects and adds meaning and structure to those circumstances. Next, the contributions of the linguistic anthropologist John Gumperz are discussed (see Chick, this volume). Gumperz's analyses of verbal communication help us understand how people may share grammatical knowledge of a language but differently contextualize what is said, in such a way that very different messages are produced and understood. The ideas of these two scholars are highlighted because so many contemporary analyses of the language of social interaction are guided by the underlying assumptions, theories, and methods provided by their work.<sup>2</sup> After several basic beliefs about language, context, and social interaction that provide unity to interactional sociolinguistics are reviewed, the discussion turns to the methods used to study the language

Although interactional sociolinguists sometimes rely upon the construct of the speech act (as do speech act theorists), analyze nonverbal as well as verbal behavior (as do microethnographers), and consider language as cultural behavior (as do ethnographers of communication), they add to these interests a concern with language structure and function, as well as with the consequences of the methods and findings of interactional studies for linguistic theory.

The discussion of Goffman and Gumperz is adapted from Chapter 4 of Schiffrin (1994).

of social interaction. Finally, although earlier sections include examples highlighting the relevance of interactional sociolinguistics to language in the classroom, the final section more explicitly suggests some pedagogical applications of this approach.

## The study of face-to-face interaction

The sociological framework associated with Erving Goffman develops the ideas of several classic sociological theorists and applies them to a domain of social life — face-to-face interaction — whose organization had gone largely unnoticed prior to Goffman's work. Goffman's theoretical perspective builds upon the ideas of two classic sociological theorists. Emile Durkheim (the "father" of modern sociology) was among the first scholars to argue that society could be analyzed not just as the sum of its individual parts (i.e., individual people) but as an entity *sui generis*. Society influences peoples' behavior because they internalize "social facts" (Durkheim, 1895), that is, the values, beliefs, and norms underlying its organization. Durkheim's specific analyses focused on different types of social organization and solidarity, as well as on the meanings of primitive religions. The other major influence on Goffman was Georg Simmel (1950), in particular, his analyses of form and meaning in small social groups, for example, the different social relationships possible in two-versus three-person groups, the social value of telling secrets, the form and meaning of sociability. Goffman combined theories about the material and symbolic organization of society and social life with a sociopsychological interest in the social processes involved in the development of the self (e.g., Mead, 1935) and an ethnographic methodology developed by sociologists interested in everyday social life and culture in urban neighborhoods and establishments.

The unique focus of Goffman's scholarship was to locate the relationship between *self* (our sense of who we are, both personally and socially) and society at a microlevel of analysis, that is, within the everyday encounters, interactions, and activities in which we routinely engage. To oversimplify a bit, what we are (or believe ourselves to be) is a product not only of social processes that operate at the level of social institutions (e.g., family, school, work) but of social processes that are embedded in the situations, occasions, encounters, and rituals of everyday life. These microlevel processes help organize and give meaning to our everyday behaviors and help provide us with a sense of self. Our use of certain mannerisms, styles, and behaviors (both verbal and nonverbal) are not only ways by which we construct and maintain social interactions but also ways of expressing our sense of who we are

and who our interactants are. Our everyday behaviors and interactions with each other thus play a crucial role in creating and maintaining the roles we fill, the statuses we occupy (our social identities), and the personalities we feel ourselves and others to have (our personal identities). The identities that we adopt also help produce social order and stability and, hence, actually help to give social institutions their meanings and foundational structures. To take a simple example, when teachers and students learn the expectations and obligations of classroom interactions, they are acquiring social identities; their attachments to these identities, and the behaviors through which those identities are displayed, also reinforce the social structure of classrooms and schools.

Goffman (1967a, p. 5) suggests that one way of viewing the self as a social construction is through the notion of *face*, "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact." Rather than locating face in the human psyche, Goffman (1967a, p. 7) states that face is "diffusely located in the flow of events in the encounter and becomes manifest only when these events are read and interpreted for the appraisals expressed in them." The maintenance of both self and face is thus built into the fabric of social interaction (Goffman, 1967a, pp. 11–12, 39— and the complementary needs of self and other (Goffman, 1963, p. 16, 1967b, p. 85).

One contribution to the maintenance of face is interpersonal ritual. Goffman identifies two types. *Presentational rituals* are those "acts through which the individual makes specific attestations to recipients concerning how he regards them"<sup>55</sup> (Goffman, 1967b, p. 71). *Avoidance rituals* are "those forms of deference which lead the actor to keep at a distance from the recipient"<sup>55</sup> (Goffman, 1967b, p. 62). Goffman's ideas about presentational and avoidance rituals are revised and expanded in Brown and Levinson's work (1987) on politeness and how different face wants or desires are reflected and negotiated in linguistic form and communicative strategy. Brown and Levinson propose two universal wants: the desire that others want the same thing that self wants (positive face) and the desire that one's own wants and needs be unimpeded and unintruded upon (negative face).

The way we use language is adapted to balancing either one or both of these two different aspects of face. Asking a person to do something, for example, may threaten the asker's negative face because it may require that the person asked alter his or her plans or go out of his or her way. It is because of this threat that such requests are often issued through what speech act theorists (e.g., Searle, 1969, 1975; see also Cohen, this volume) call *indirect speech acts*. The prevalence of indirect speech acts in the classroom suggests the importance of maintaining face in educational settings. For example, rather than say "Give out

these papers for me<sup>5</sup> a teacher might say "Let's give out these papers" (a positive-face strategy because of its appeal to common wants), or "If it's not too much trouble, I was wondering if you might give out these papers," (a negative-face strategy because it avoids imposing upon the addressee). Student strategies for avoiding wrong answers or reprimands (e.g., through silence, Gilmore, 1985) also point out the prevalence of face-saving strategies in the classroom. The organization of some classroom encounters into servicelike encounters (business transactions in which a customer requests a good or service from a server; Merritt, 1984, 1982) suggests that ritualized interchanges and formulaic moves can provide a framework for the preservation of face.

Another contribution not just to the maintenance of face but to the presentation of self more generally is the material and symbolic resources made available through the social establishments and institutions in which people interact. Such resources are useful in several ways: They can display certain favored aspects of self (Goffman, 1959), physically facilitate the division of self into a public character and private performer (Goffman, 1959; Chap. 3), or show performers either embracing or distancing themselves from institutionally allocated characters (Goffman, 1963). Like all institutions and establishments, schools and classrooms contain a wide array of resources that allow people to occupy the different social roles associated with education (e.g., teacher, student, administrator) and to engage in, and coordinate, the activities that sustain those roles. Such resources are both material (e.g., the physical design of classrooms, the arrangement of seats and desks, educational materials and supplies) and symbolic (e.g., explicit codes of dress, implicit codes of verbal behavior, procedures for evaluation, discipline).

Seating arrangements provide a simple example of the relationship of identity to material and symbolic resources in the classroom. Teachers from grade school to graduate school often arrange the seats and desks of their classrooms so that students are facing one another as well as (or instead of) the teacher at the front of the room. Such physical realignments alter the participation framework (Goffman, 1981; Philips, 1983) of the classroom, so that students can talk to one another as well as to the teacher (an adjustment of speaking rights that is believed to allow cooperative learning). Such realignments also alter the division of educational labor in the classroom, blurring the boundaries between more traditional views of the roles of teachers and students. Thus, they are both a material and a symbolic resource for the creation of social identities. (See Eckert, 1989, on the resources used by students to display different social identities in high school.)

It was noted earlier that everyday social interaction plays a crucial role in maintaining our sense of social order and stability. Social interac-

tion — and the maintenance of face — also facilitates linguistic meaning. As Goffman (1967b, p. 85) points out, we share responsibility for the maintenance of one another's face: "[Individuals must hold hands in a chain of ceremony, each giving deferentially with proper demeanor to the one on the right what will be received deferentially from the one on the left." This interpersonal dependency can also be applied to the construction of meaning during verbal interaction: Each utterance receives part of its meaning from another's prior utterance and gives part of its meaning back to the other to use in a next utterance. Such meanings can often be segmented and labeled as particular interactive moves that both respond to and elicit other moves. This dependency helps to create patterned sequences that are more or less appropriate to different social circumstances or occasions.<sup>3</sup> Thus, it is not just the self and the meaning of utterances that owe much to the process of social interaction; our knowledge of what to do with language, and how and when to do it, is also based on the give and take of everyday social interaction.

Although Goffman does not provide detailed analyses of the role of language in social interaction, his focus on interaction provides an important complement to John Gumperz's theory of verbal communication and his study of how situated inferences arise from (and guide) language use. After Gumperz's ideas are reviewed in the next section, several basic beliefs about language, context, and social interaction that provide unity to interactional sociolinguistics are proposed.

## **The study of verbal communication**

In the introduction to a collection of his essays, Gumperz (1982a, p. vii) states that he "seeks to develop interpretive sociolinguistic approaches to the analysis of real time processes in face to face encounters." After some of Gumperz's work prior to the 1982a collection is described, the concepts and methods that Gumperz has developed for the achievement of his goal are discussed.

Gumperz (1971, edited by Dil) is a collection of Gumperz's essays through 1971. The dual focus of this volume, dialect diversity and language and social interaction, reflects the themes that continue (and become even more unified) in the later collection (1982a). The research reported in the 1971 work is grounded in an assumption that is basic

The analysis of such sequences often depends upon ethnographic observations and insights (Saville-Troike, this volume). Compare analyses by the Birmingham group on exchange structure (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975) and ethnomethodologists on classroom interactions (e.g., Mehan, 1979.)

to social and cultural anthropology: The meaning, structure, and use of language are socially and culturally relative. The importance of this assumption is illustrated through studies focusing on a variety of different issues. For example, Gumperz's work in India — on regional and social language difference, on Hindi-Punjabi code switching, and on linguistic convergence — all focus not just on linguistic structure but on how those structures become part of the verbal repertoires of interacting social groups.

Despite the social and cultural emphasis of Gumperz's early work, individual expression also finds a place in this research. In his studies of code switching, for example, Gumperz defines two types of switching from one language variety to another. First is *situational code switching*: People may switch in accord with "clear changes<sup>55</sup> in . . . participants<sup>5</sup> definition of each others<sup>5</sup> rights and obligation" (1971, p. 294). Second is *metaphorical code switching*: People may switch varieties within a single situation just to convey a different view of that situation and their relationship. In such cases, the language switch "relates to particular kinds of topics or subject matters<sup>55</sup> and is used "in the enactment of two<sup>55</sup> or more different relationships among the same set of individuals<sup>55</sup> (1971, p. 295; see also Sridhar, this volume).

Connections between culture, society, individual, and code are developed in Gumperz (1982a), essays which seek to develop interpretive sociolinguistic approaches to the analysis of ongoing processes in face-to-face interactions. In the first article of this collection, Gumperz (p.

points out that the anthropological and linguistic study of speakers of other languages has had a tremendous impact on our understanding of culture and cognition, by providing "empirical evidence for the contention that human cognition is significantly affected by historical forces.<sup>55</sup> The discovery of different grammatical systems, including different phonemic (sound) and semantic (meaning) systems, showed that "what we perceive and retain in our mind is a function of our *culturally* determined predisposition to perceive and assimilate<sup>55</sup> (Gumperz, 1982a, p. 12, emphasis added). Put another way, our verbal behavior, as well as the structure of the linguistic code underlying that behavior, is open to external (social, cultural) influences. Gumperz suggests that, in order to understand these influences, we need to integrate what we know about grammar, culture, and interactive conventions into a general theory of verbal communication. Such a theory would be built upon a single overall framework of concepts and analytical procedures.

The framework developed by Gumperz builds upon his earlier ideas about culture, society, language, and the self. The three central concepts discussed here - contextualization cue, contextual presupposition, situated inference - are part of Gumperz's integrated program for the

analysis of verbal communication. Before these concepts are discussed, it is important to make some background observations.

Recall, first, Gumperz's observation that our perceptions and memories are an outcome of culturally determined predispositions. One feature of modern urban societies is their social and cultural heterogeneity: People from very different social and cultural backgrounds come into contact with one another. Such contacts can lead to communicative difficulties precisely because of the point noted earlier: People's perceptions of similarities and differences in the world, including their predispositions about language and the way it is used, are culturally bound. To further complicate matters, it is not just the core grammar of a language (i.e., syntax, phonology, semantics) that is open to cultural influence and is a source of communicative difficulty. An equally pervasive source of misunderstanding lies in the marginal features of language: "signalling mechanisms such as intonation, speech rhythm, and choice among lexical, phonetic, and syntactic options" (Gumperz, 1982a, p. 16). Since we are typically unaware that we are using these features, it is all the more difficult for us to realize that they have communicative significance. Gumperz's studies of both interracial (blacks and whites in the United States) and enterethnic (Indians and British in England) settings show how differences in the marginal features of language can cause misunderstandings, lead to the formation of racial and ethnic stereotypes, and contribute to inequalities in power and status (see also Auer & DiLuzio, 1992; Cook-Gumperz, 1986; Gumperz, 1981; Gumperz & Roberts, 1991).

The signaling mechanisms just described are what Gumperz calls *contextualization cues*: aspects of language and behavior (verbal and nonverbal signs) that relate what is said to *contextual presuppositions*, that is background knowledge that allows *situated inferences* about what one's interlocutor intends to convey. The following example (from Gumperz, 1982a, p. 147) illustrates the use of rising intonation as a contextualization cue.

Teacher: James, what does this word say?

James: I don't know.

Teacher: Well, if you don't want to try, someone else will. Freddy?

Freddy: Is that a p or a b?

Teacher: {*encouragingly*} It's a p.

Freddy: Pen.

The teacher's response ("Well, if you don't want to try, someone else will") indicates her interpretation of James's "I don't know," not only in terms of its literal meaning but as an indication that James did not wish to try to answer the question. Gumperz notes, however, that "I don't know" had final rising intonation, understood in the African-



American community of which James was a member as conveying a desire for encouragement (cf. "I need some encouragement").<sup>4</sup> Thus, we might say that the teacher did not retrieve the contextual presuppositions needed to accurately interpret James's message (his speech act) from his use of rising intonation.

As illustrated in the example, Gumperz's studies show that contextualization cues can affect the basic meaning of a message. Although such cues are used habitually and automatically by members of a particular social group, they are almost never consciously noted or assigned conventional meanings. Rather, they signal the speaker's implicit definition of the situation and more important, how the propositional content of talk is to be understood. It is because contextualization cues are learned through long periods of close, face-to-face contact that many people in modern, culturally diverse, socially heterogeneous societies are likely to interact without benefit of shared cues.

When listeners share speakers' contextualization cues, subsequent interactions proceed smoothly. The methodological consequence of this is that one can discover shared meaning by investigating the process of interaction itself, that is, by using the reaction that an utterance evokes as evidence of whether interpretive conventions were shared (Gumperz, 1981a, p. 5). Especially revealing are analyses of misunderstandings between people from different groups who do not share contextualization cues and thus cannot retrieve the contextual presuppositions necessary to situated inferences about meaning. White teachers' negative reactions to black students' "sharing-time" stories, for example, show that cultural conventions for the telling and interpretation of coherent stories are not shared by the two communities (Michaels, 1981); whereas the white community builds stories upon temporal coherence, the black community depends upon topical coherence. The studies collected in Gumperz (1981b, 1982b), as well as analyses by Tannen (1984, 1990) and Young (1994), also show that misunderstandings can provide telling evidence that contextualization cues are at work. Such misunderstandings can have devastating social consequences for members of minority groups who are denied access to valued resources, based partly (but not totally) on the inability of those in control of crucial gatekeeping transactions to accurately use others' contextualization cues as a basis from which to infer intended meanings (see Erickson & Shultz, 1982; see also Erickson, this volume).

Before this section is summarized, it is important to note that although some of Gumperz's concepts (inference, involvement) seem rooted in the individual, they are actually grounded in a view of the self

Gumperz's more recent transcriptions of this utterance would capture its final rising intonation (see Gumperz & Berenz, 1993).

and what it does (e.g., make inferences, become involved) as a member of a social and cultural group and as a participant in the social construction of meaning. For example, Gumperz (1982a, p. 209) reformulates Hymes's concept of communicative competence (1974) in interactional terms, to include "the knowledge of linguistic and related communicative conventions that speakers must have to create and sustain conversational cooperation" (see also Gumperz, 1985; Saville-Troike, this volume). And even in the complex question of speakers' internal differentiation of two linguistic systems, Gumperz (1982a, p. 99) argues that "effective speaking presupposed *sociolinguistically* based inferences about where systemic boundaries lie" and that "members have their own *socially defined* notions of code or grammatical system" (emphasis added).

In sum, the key to Gumperz's sociolinguistics of verbal communication is a view of language as a socially and culturally constructed symbol system that is used in ways that reflect macrolevel social meanings (e.g., group identity, status differences) but also create microlevel social meanings (i.e., what one is saying and doing at a particular moment in time). Speakers are members of social and cultural groups: The way we use language not only reflects our group-based identity but also provides situated indexes as to who we are, what we want to communicate, and how we know how to do so. The ability to produce and understand these indexical processes as they occur in, and are influenced by, local contexts is part of our communicative competence. As described in the previous section, the work of Erving Goffman also focuses upon situated knowledge, the self, and social context. The next section brings together the work of these two scholars as the basis for proposing some overall themes of interactional sociolinguistics and some further suggestions of the relevance of this approach to language in the classroom.

## **Language, culture, and society as situated processes**

Two different sets of interests have been reviewed, one stemming from concerns about the self and society (Goffman), and the other from concerns about language and culture (Gumperz). As mentioned, Goffman's work focused on how the organization of social life (in institutions, interactions, etc.) provides contexts in which both the conduct of self and the communication with another can be made sense of (both by those present in an interaction and by outside analysts). It was noted that Gumperz's work focuses on how interpretations of context are critical to the communication of information and to another's understanding of a speaker's intention.

Despite these different starting points and analytic foci, several shared themes and perspectives underlie interactional sociolinguistics. Most generally put, *interactional sociolinguistics* is the study of the linguistic and social construction of interaction. It provides a frame-work within which to analyze social context and to incorporate partici-pants' own understanding of context into the inferencing of meaning. Goffman's sociological research focused attention on the interactional order underlying social occasions, situations, and encounters. Knowledge of the interactional order can lead to analysis of the socially constituted moves that help create a sense of reality in a particular interaction and a set of expectations about what will come next. These expectations are similar to contextual presuppositions and, thus, are critical to the way situated inferences are drawn from contextualization cues. If participants do not have some sense of what is going on during an interaction (e.g., What kind of occasion is this? What kind of activity are we engaged in?), they cannot use contextualization cues to draw inferences about others' meanings. Thus, the richly textured analyses of social situations, social interactions, participant roles, and statuses offered by interactional sociolinguistics all contribute to our understand-ing of the contextual presuppositions that help us use contextualization cues to draw situated inferences about what others say, mean, and do.<sup>5</sup>

It may help at this point to give an example of how knowledge of *interpersonal meanings* (the symbolic values of what is said and done) and *social structure* (abstract forms of social life) can allow us to more fully understand the contextual presuppositions that figure in hearers' inferences of speakers' meaning. The example also suggests a connection between contextualization cues and the face-saving strategies discussed in the earlier section on Goffman.

The situation described (from Gumperz, 1982a, p. 30) took place after an informal graduate-level seminar. A black student, about to leave the room with several other black and white students, approached the instructor. (Gumperz's presentation of the sequence has been modified.)

Contextual presuppositions are similar to the sociological notion of *definition of a situation* (Cooley, 1902): What we know about, and what we expect to find, in a particular activity (or situation) provides information by which we characterize and define that activity (or situation). Our perceptions of social circumstance also have real consequences: "[I]f men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (Cooley, 1902). The fact that we draw situated inferences about another's message through the use of contextualization cues that signal our definition of the situation has an important impact on the interactional sociolinguistic perspective on communication. In contrast to some other perspectives (Schiffrin, 1994, Chap. 11), communication requires two sources of intersubjectivity (i.e., shared knowledge and meta-knowledge; Schiffrin, 1990; Taylor & Cameron, 1987): a shared definition of the situation in which interaction takes place and the use of strategies dependent on the same repertoire of contextualization cues.

- Student: Could I talk to you for a minute? I'm gonna apply for a fellowship and I was wondering if I could get a recommendation?
- Instructor: Okay. Come along to the office and tell me what you want to do.
- Student: (*As the instructor and other students leave the room, turns his head slightly to the other students*) Ahma git me a gig! (*rough gloss: Ym going to get myself some support*)

Gumperz's analysis of the utterance "Ahma git me a gig!" focuses on how interpretations of the speaker's intent are related to the different linguistic (specifically, phonological and lexical) qualities of the utterance serving as contextualization cues. These cues signal a shift from one variety of English to another: The student asks the instructor for a recommendation in European-American standard English but speaks to the other students in African-American Vernacular English (see Rickford, this volume). Because the student's addressee has changed (from instructor to other students), this is an example of situational code switching which also has metaphorical significance.<sup>6</sup> Gumperz (1982a,

31—32) explains that the lexical and phonological features functioning as contextualization cues evoke a number of contextual presuppositions, which provide for an interpretation of its meaning. Gumperz suggests that the student, by using a method known as *playback* (discussed later), is positioning himself in relation to conflicting norms about what blacks must do if they "are to get along in a White dominated world." "Ahma git me a gig!" thus has a clear face-saving function: It is a positive-face strategy linking together the black students in the classroom. Notice how this interpretation depends upon social and cultural knowledge at a macrolevel (i.e., the social and economic relationships between blacks and whites) and a microlevel (the utterance follows the instructor's exit from the room, and thus he is not an addressed recipient of the remark [Goffman, 1974], and is directed to the black students remaining in the room). Social information at both macrolevels and microlevels thus forms part of the contextual presuppositions underlying the inferred meaning of the utterance.

This example is useful for still another reason. Both code switching and the use of vernacular varieties have often been regarded negatively by teachers (see Sridhar, this volume). These negative views overlook the fact that linguistic alternations may serve not only instructional,

The distinction between situational and metaphorical code switching is difficult to maintain in this (and probably other) cases. The student's switch seems situational because of the change in addressee; that is, the teacher left the room. (Note the importance of observation and accurate note taking.) However, the speaker is displaying a changed relationship with people who were already present in the setting, a characteristic of metaphorical code switches: The black students in the classroom switch their participation status from unaddressed to addressed recipients, a switch which also precedes (and allows) the display of solidarity. Heller (1988) presents further studies of code switching in the interactional sociolinguistic perspective.

social, and cultural functions in the classroom but also important interactional face-saving functions (see Gumperz & Hernandez-Chavez, 1972). These functions may be identified by an interactional sociolinguistic analysis.

The connection between contextualization cues and face portrayed through this example reveals an important interdependence between Goffman's and Gumperz's work. Both scholars allow language to have a relatively active role in creating a sense of social order and in altering participants' sense of what is going on from moment to moment. As the example showed, contextualization cues can alter not only the meaning of a message but also the participation framework of talk: Different intentions, and different aspects of self and other, can be displayed through subtle changes in the way utterances are presented. Goffman's later work on the self (1981) builds upon his earlier (1959) division (between character and performer) to locate the self within a participation framework — a set of positions which individuals within the perceptual range of an utterance may take in relation to that utterance. The kinds of devices identified by Gumperz as contextualization cues are exactly what indicate shifts in participation statuses. This means that sociolinguists "can be looked to for help in the study of footing [participation status]" (Goffman, 1981, p. 128). But sociolinguists can also get help from the sociological analyses of footing: "[I]f [sociolinguists] are to compete in this heretofore literary and psychological area, then presumably they must find a structural means of doing so . . . the structural underpinnings of changes in footing" (p. 128). Thus, what Gumperz's linguistic analyses add to Goffman's dissection of the self are a knowledge of some of the devices that convey changes in participant status (i.e., footing) and a view of how the way an utterance is produced allows the situated inference of a new participant alignment.

The analysis of involvement also illustrates an interdependence between the ideas of Goffman and Gumperz that may be useful for our understanding of the classroom. Earlier it was noted that contextual presuppositions and contextualization cues are critical to the situated inference of meaning. Also necessary to this process is the maintenance of involvement: We cannot understand each other (i.e., achieve intersubjectivity, shared knowledge) if we cannot attract and sustain each others' attention (Gumperz, 1982a, p. 4). Although understanding thus requires involvement, the process also works in the opposite direction: Maintaining involvement also requires sharing linguistic and sociocultural knowledge (Gumperz, 1982a, p. 3).

Goffman's study (1963) of behavior in public places is relevant to Gumperz's concern with the creation and effects of involvement. Goffman focuses on the social organization of involvement: He describes the way different social occasions (and different phases of occasions)

can create a wide array of expectations for the display of involvement. Access rituals such as greetings, for example, require heightened involvement (Goffman, 1971; Schiffrin, 1977). Thus, the processes of both being involved and showing involvement are themselves socially situated. The situated nature of involvement has a bearing on the communicative value of involvement (Gumperz's concern): Since interactions impose their own rules of involvement, inferences that are based on involvement are also subject to broader rules of social engagement.

The relationship between involvement and shared knowledge is clearly relevant to classroom settings. We know from Gumperz's work that involvement both requires and creates shared knowledge. Multicultural classrooms present special challenges in this regard: lack of student involvement in lessons in classrooms in which students' cultures differ from that of the teacher (or differ among themselves) may be due to a lack of shared social and cultural knowledge. Such gaps may, in turn, hinder learning, that is, the acquisition of more shared knowledge. Foster (1989) describes, for example, the communicative strategies and styles that create involvement and facilitate learning for African-Americans in a college classroom, both of which differ from the strategies and styles in classrooms following European-American norms. Other studies reveal the communicative differences between Japanese and American students in student-led discussion groups (Watanbe, 1993) and between Greek and American students during discussion and disagreement with their teachers (Kakava, 1993). It is important for educators to be aware of the different styles through which people from different cultures create and display involvement. Otherwise, it can be difficult to differentiate between behaviors which display a lack of involvement and behaviors which stem from the use of different cultural norms for displaying engagement in an activity.

Goffman's work on involvement is also relevant to the classroom. Goffman demonstrated that involvement is socially structured: Social situations, occasions, and encounters impose their own constraints on the amount, type, and display of involvement. A typical day at school, or a typical classroom period, requires many different kinds of involvement from students: The involvement required during discussion groups, for example, is clearly different from that required during lectures. Norms for displaying involvement also underlie the classroom practices by which students signal shifts in their participation status. Hand raising, for example, is a common contextualization cue used by students to signal that they want to take a turn at talk. Norms for engaging in such practices differ according to classroom type and/or activity: Students in small graduate-level seminars, for example, are often encouraged to speak without raising their hands. Despite the pervasiveness of such contextualization cues in the classroom, neither

teachers nor students are always aware of their own reliance on, and interpretation of, such cues. I recently noticed my own tendency to look more at students who looked at me and nodded their heads during my lectures. Not only did I assume that they were more interested and appreciative but also that their nonverbal behavior could help me gauge whether my remarks were being attended to and understood. Recent studies by Sadker and Sadker (1994) show equally subtle interpretations at work in the organization of turn-taking behavior in elementary school classrooms. Whereas boys were likely to start speaking - and be allowed to continue speaking — without raising their hands, girls often raised their hands and did not speak until the teacher called on them; the result was fewer opportunities for girls to contribute to classroom discussion (see Freeman and McElhinny, this volume).

It has been suggested in this section that Goffman's focus on social interaction complements Gumperz's focus on verbal communication: Goffman describes the social and interpersonal contexts that provide the presuppositions that Gumperz finds so crucial to the inferencing of meaning. Thus interactional sociolinguistics can be used to identify different kinds and levels of contexts, to conceptualize the organizational and interpretive role of contexts, and to describe how linguistic aspects of utterances allow us to draw situated inferences about what others say, mean, and do. In brief, interactional sociolinguistics, provides analyses of how language works along with participants' understanding of social context to allow the inferencing of meaning.

## How to study the language of social interaction

Learning how to do interactional sociolinguistic analyses typically requires training in linguistics and in either anthropology or sociology. This section offers some fundamental points about such analyses that might guide teachers who want to adopt some insights of this approach for use in their classrooms.

Detailed analyses of the language of social interaction require high-quality tape (or video) recordings of naturalistic (rather than experimentally elicited) social interactions. Recordings are important for several reasons. First, one cannot discover the structure of interactions without repeatedly viewing and/or listening to what was said and done during those interactions. (By the same token, discovering the regularities in verbal interaction usually requires more than one example of a specific type of interaction; the exact number depends on the length and complexity of the interaction.) Second, since contextualization cues are often relatively subtle aspects of spoken language or gesture, identifying

contextualization cues requires a recording of verbal and nonverbal behavior that is accurate enough to allow the analyst to hear (and/or see) the same behaviors to which participants are attending.

Once the interactions of interest have been recorded, it is critical to transcribe the recording. This provides a written record of what has happened that is essential to analysis (it is easier to compare different sections of an interaction by turning pages than by pressing the buttons of a tape recorder). Transcription is a long and tedious process; depending on the number of speakers, their degree of overlapping talk, the quality of the recording, and so on, a single hour of interaction may take anywhere from 5 to 15 hours to transcribe. Also influencing the amount of time needed for transcription is the transcription system one decides to use. Such systems vary from relatively broad (undetailed) to relatively narrow (detailed); different systems are summarized in Schiffrin (1994, App. 2). Interactional sociolinguists often use transcription conventions that capture some prosodic information (since intonation, stress, and rhythm frequently function as contextualization cues).

The analysis of one's interaction - identifying the way language both structures and is structured by the interaction — requires a process of immersion in the details of the interaction. One must listen to (and/or watch) what happened and review the transcript numerous times before one can understand how the interaction falls into different phases and actions and how different contextual presuppositions guide what is said and done. Earlier the need for tape- and/or video-recorded interactions for this task was noted, as was the considerable investment of time and experience required for producing a usable transcript. Students can, however, become familiar with interactional sociolinguistic methods without recorded data. Some interchanges occur frequently enough, and are regular enough, that students can write down details of what happened after the fact and, after a few observations, develop a coding system for keeping track of what was said and done. A collection of service encounters, greetings, and directions to public places, for example, is relatively easy to assemble and can provide a quick entry into some of the methods and ideas of interactional sociolinguistics. I often introduce students to interactional sociolinguistics by having them ask twenty people for directions to a public place; they write down what happened afterward. Sometimes they do the exercise in pairs, so that one person takes a primarily speaking role (acts as a participant), and the other more of a listening role (acts as an observer who can contribute more to the written record of the interaction). Students then analyze the directions they received by breaking them down into different phases (e.g., opening, request, provision of instructions, information checks, appreciation, closing), identifying the linguistic and behavior



cues that differentiate, and are associated with, those phases, and describing the background knowledge that facilitates understanding of the directions.

In addition to identifying the phases of interactions, interactional sociolinguists try to discover interlocutors' inferences about each other's meanings and the communicative strategies that underlie particular utterances. Both these tasks require close attention to what is said by one party and how it is responded to by another. In fact, it is often the response to an utterance (rather than the utterance itself) that provides the most reliable clue to the interactional importance (as well as the situated inferences) of an utterance. Interactional sociolinguists sometimes check their interpretations of actions and meanings with the participants themselves (Tannen, 1984) or with other people who have varying degrees of familiarity with the ways of speaking used in the interaction. This playback method allowed Gumperz to identify the interactional function of "Ahma git me a gig!"<sup>55</sup> for the black students to whom it was directed. As noted in the earlier discussion, this utterance positioned the speaker in relation to conflicting norms about what blacks must do if they "are to get along in a White dominated world."<sup>55</sup> Gumperz also found that people less familiar with ways of speaking in the black community interpreted "Ahma git me a gig!"<sup>55</sup> quite differently. When different interpretations lead to misunderstandings of speaker intentions, playback with the original participants in the interaction is all the more valuable a route toward discovery of contextual presuppositions.

Although interactional sociolinguistic analyses do require technical training, it is important to remember that one of the main goals of interactional sociolinguistics is to understand the language of social interaction. We are all able to use language in our everyday lives and our everyday interactions with other people. One reason that we can do so is through our own implicit analyses of what we (and others) are seeking to do with language and of how what we say and do follows from (and leads to) what others say and do. In a sense, then, what interactional sociolinguistics is trying to do is uncover the knowledge that all of us already have. Thus, even though novices might not be able to do the same kind of interactional sociolinguistic analyses as scholars, they can still try to make explicit the knowledge that they use so automatically in everyday interactions with one another.

## Pedagogical applications

Thus far in this chapter, it has become evident that interactional sociolinguistics provides a way to analyze social context and to incorporate

participants<sup>5</sup> own understanding of context into the inferencing of meaning. This perspective can be applied not only to our understanding of classroom interactions (as suggested through examples in earlier sections) but also to the way we teach a language. It can be said that interactional sociolinguistics has a very general application (in defining the goal of language teaching), as well as more specific applications (in guiding lesson plans and interactions) in the classroom.

Learning a language in a way that enables one to use that language for a range of social and expressive purposes requires more than learning lists of vocabulary items, syntactic paradigms, and natively-like pronunciations. Rather, as ethnographers of communication have made so clear (see Saville-Troike, this volume), language is a system of use whose rules and norms are an integral part of culture. Thus, learning a language is more like developing communicative competence. What one acquires is knowledge that governs appropriate use of language in concrete situations of everyday life; one learns how to engage in conversation, shop in a store, be interviewed for a job, pray, joke, argue, tease, and warn, and even when to be silent.

Once we see that the focus of language teaching is to help students develop communicative competence, it is easy to find a place for interactional sociolinguistics within the curriculum. Recall that interactional sociolinguistics provides ways of describing and analyzing social events and situations — the contexts that help define particular utterances as socially and culturally appropriate. Thus, when teaching students how to make requests, for example, teachers could incorporate into lessons that cover the use of different forms (e.g., modals, questions, commands) information about to whom, when, why, and where such forms are considered appropriate. A valuable part of such lessons would be discussion of the possible social meanings of using a form that is inappropriate. Imperatives, for example, are often used in situations of asymmetric power, as, for example, when an employer issues a directive to an employee by saying "Type these letters by tomorrow morning." Using a form that implies a higher social position than one usually holds, then, might be interpreted as arrogant or presumptuous (e.g., as if an employee asked for vacation time by saying "Give me a vacation by tomorrow morning").

Such lessons could include not only contextual descriptions of interpersonal and institutional settings but also very specific discussions of how different ways of making requests work as contextualization cues for participants - how different words, intonations, syntactic forms, and so on, structure participants' definitions of what is going on in the interaction. It would be especially useful in an ESL classroom for students to participate in such lessons by actually collecting data from different situations in which they either make or receive requests. They

could learn how to analyze such situations (e.g., by identifying the social status and role of participants, the degree to which their request imposed upon the their party) and observe for themselves which forms seem to be used by whom and for what purpose. Similarly, students could tape-record some of their own interactions or role-play interactions that they have found problematic or that differ markedly from those with which they are familiar. Such tape recordings and role-plays could be analyzed by students in both participant and observer capacities: They could comment on the meanings and interpretations of what went on and try to identify what was responsible for their own inferences and their own responses. Finally, students' native experiences could also provide a valuable cross-cultural perspective. By discussing the forms that would be appropriate in comparable situations in their own cultures, they could become aware of the pervasiveness and cultural relativity of contextualization cues.

In addition to guiding specific areas of the language curriculum, interactional sociolinguistics can help both students and teachers understand the social and interactional dynamics of their classrooms. In an earlier section, some of the ways that contextualization cues pervade the classroom were pointed out: Gumperz's example with James's "I don't know"<sup>5</sup> showed their relevance in student-teacher interactions, and his example with the black student's "Ahma git me a gig!" showed their relevance in student-student interactions (see also Gumperz, 1981). Contextualization cues are routinely used in other kinds of classroom interactions, for example, to help organize transitions from one speaker to another (McHoul, 1978) or to signal transitions between different activities (Dorr-Bremme, 1990). Teachers can increase both their own and their students' awareness of the use and interpretation of such cues by video recordings and analyses of classroom interactions. Recordings of student behavior during different classroom activities, for example, might reveal the subtle ways that students indicate shifting interest in a topic, readiness and willingness to ask a question or make a comment, and lack of understanding of a point. Analyses of such recordings could help students (especially in multicultural classrooms) become aware of the behaviors associated with different participation statuses in the classroom - relatively passive roles such as listener to a lecture or more active roles such as participant in group discussions. Likewise, recordings of teacher talk could reveal the verbal and nonverbal behaviors that teachers use to signal transitions from one activity to another, for example, the use of discourse markers such as *now* or OK (Schiffrin, 1987) or shifts in physical position or stance to indicate upcoming summaries, introduction of a new topic, or change from lecture to discussion. Thus, both students and teachers could benefit from increased awareness of how contextualization cues can guide classroom interactions.

In sum, interactional sociolinguistics can help teachers and students identify how different kinds and levels of social and cultural contexts guide the use and interpretation of language. By understanding how context is interwoven with what we say, mean, and do through language — and by incorporating that understanding into the goals, curriculum design, lessons, and everyday practices of their classrooms - teachers may be able to help students become more communicatively competent in the language that they are trying to learn.

### Suggestions for further reading

- Auer, P., & Di Luzio, A. (Eds.). (1992). *The contextualization of language*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins.  
This is a collection of papers discussing and updating Gumperz's theoretical concepts, as well as recent empirical studies focusing on interactional meanings (with special emphasis on the role of prosody in contextualizing meaning).
- Brown, P., & Levinson, S. (1987). *Politeness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.  
Brown and Levinson present a theory of politeness in social interaction that has a potentially wide application to different languages, cultures, and social situations. The book also contains a rich set of examples of different communicative strategies that are considered polite.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. New York: Anchor Books.  
This is Goffman's earliest book and a classic in sociology. It presents his basic theory of the self and introduces the study of social interaction. The book is rich with examples and insights about self-presentation and social life.
- Goffman, E. (1981). *Forms of talk*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.  
This collection of Goffman's articles has the most direct relevance to sociolinguistics. Among the chapters are "Footing" (a discussion of participation status, with a mention of contextualization cues) and "Replies and Responses" (a discussion of coherence relations in discourse).
- Gumperz, J. (1982a). *Discourse strategies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.  
This collection of Gumperz's articles provides a succinct theoretical and methodological introduction to the crucial concepts in this framework. The book also applies the framework in a range of different social and cultural settings.
- Gumperz, J. (1982b). *Language and social identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.  
This collection of articles by Gumperz, his students, and colleagues applies the interactional sociolinguistic framework in different social and cultural settings.
- Schiffrin, D. (1987). *Discourse markers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.  
Schiffrin provides an empirical analysis of different words and expressions

## Deborah Schiffrin

(e.g., *and, I mean, y'know*) in English conversation using insights from interactional sociolinguistics. The book provides an understanding of patterns of language use which are difficult to capture in standard language teaching texts.

Tannen, D. (1984). *Conversational style*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Tannen presents an analysis of conversations between friends, with special attention to misunderstandings based on cultural and subcultural differences in communicative style.

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*Deborah Schiffrin*

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