Indexicalities of language contact in an era of globalization: Engaging John Gumperz’ legacy

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Abstract:
In this paper, I discuss Gumperz’s statements regarding indexicality in different phases of his work: The ‘Introduction’ to Directions (1972); a framing essay in Rethinking linguistic relativity (1996); and a recent series of interviews and essays in Language and social interaction (Eerdmans, Prevignano & Thibault, 2002). Situating his treatments vis-à-vis other work in Linguistic Anthropology on dimensions of indexicality (Silverstein, 2003; Urciuoli, 1996), the paper discusses how indexical concepts such as ‘ordering’, when paired with Goffmanian participation analysis, provide useful ways of theorizing and analyzing the dynamics of immigration-based language contact, and, in particular, the temporal and spatial scaling of such dynamics. The argument draws upon fieldwork in immigrant neighborhoods and networks in Belgium (Blommaert, Collins & Slembrouck, 2005) and Upstate New York (Collins & La Santa, 2006, Collins & Slembrouck, 2006b).

Introduction
Greetings, I want to say that it is a pleasure and an honor to be here today for this event. My apologies for arriving late; plane schedules had me coming in on the Thursday morning of colloquium itself. Let me begin with a brief reminiscence of John at Berkeley in the late 1970s early 1980s, when I was there. Two things stood out at the time, and still do. One was that he had a notable intellectual alertness, engagement, and questing. For John an interest in ideas, a desire to grapple with the details of data, a sense of the larger world, these were all part of his way of being in the world, as he was entering his sixties. By then I had also encountered more than a few academics in their early forties who lacked these traits, were instead defensive, narrow-minded and growing bitter; John’s intellectual enthusiasm was a model to emulate. A second notable trait was that John was open to people of differing backgrounds. This seemed to me not so much as ease with the world as an interest in those around him, in a word, a willingness to talk, a lack of academic standoffishness. I think that many found this an attractive features of the man.

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John Gumperz is justly renowned for many contributions to sociolinguistics: early work on multilingualism; fundamental contributions to the Ethnography of Communication; and pioneering analyses of ‘contextualization’ processes. What I want to address today is something perhaps less well noted, and that has been his persistent concern with the philosophical and analytic implications of indexicality for the analysis of language and society. In this paper, I discuss Gumperz’s statements regarding indexicality in different phases of his work, situate his treatments vis à vis other work on metacommunication and indexical ordering (Silverstein, 2003; Agha, 2005). I then argue that such indexical concepts, when paired with Goffmanian participation analysis (Goffman, 1974, 1981), provide new and powerful ways of theorizing and analyzing the dynamics of globalized language contact. These include, in particular, the temporal and spatial scaling of such dynamics in immigration-based language contact. The argument draws upon fieldwork in immigrant neighborhoods and networks in Belgium (Blommaert, Collins & Slembrouck, 2005) and Upstate New York (Collins & La Santa, 2006; Collins & Slembrouck, 2006).

That, however, is the written paper; my comments today will be much more hasty. Let me first address the issue of indexicality. At it’s most basic, the concept focuses on the question of context, how there is always more to what is meant or understood than what is said. In rereading John’s remarks on indexicality, especially in the recent collection Language and Interaction: Discussions with John J. Gumperz, I was struck by his insistence across a wide range of cases that very small differences of form can have large consequences for meaning, because those small differences can cue implicit frames of interpretation.

In thinking about this matter, I was reminded of another encounter at Berkeley, as about aspects of my own life before and after that period, hinging on the little bit of English, the diminutive suffix, –ie [i], that attaches to some peoples’ first names: Billy for Bill, Sandy for Sandra, and so forth. Early upon arriving at Berkeley, in fall of 1978, I had met my now-esteemed co-panelist Deborah Tannen. Once or more than once I had addressed her as Debbie, at which point she informed me, that it was Deborah, not Debbie. I don’t remember, whether at the time or subsequently I made what we can now all presume was the intended connection between form and meaning: That to use the diminutive suffix on a woman’s name was to lessen her, to address as if she were a girl, a child, when she was in fact a woman. It was, to speak bluntly, habitual sexist practice; use of –ie indexed an order of gender that was then being contested.

In some respects, I was obtuse not to have been more aware of that. A number of years earlier, at the age of 15, I had left my home in Alabama, where I had always been called Jimmy. But when I arrived on the West Coast, California and then Oregon, for what became a new life, I presented myself to one and all as Jim, not Jimmy. To my ears “Jim” had the weight of a maturity desperately yearned for; put otherwise ‘–ie’ and it’s lack indexed not gender but generation. But the matter doesn’t end there.

Recently, I’ve been making plans to visit Alabama, after a hiatus of 15 years and a major personal loss, in order to see old places and visits cousins, one of whom I once had a very stormy, fraternal relation. We recently talked on the phone, not having talked in over a decade; it was good to hear his voice and the cadences and accent of my childhood. At some point in the conversation he said words to the effect that: “Jim, so now you’re Jim, you got rid of the –ie?” After I’d explained that yes, this had happened
long again, he remarked, “I’m still Buddy”. For many Southerners the ‘-ie’ is preferred to blunt monosyllabic names, so we have Patsy Cline, Jimmy Carter, and Stevie Ray Vaughn. For my cousin, to ‘-ie’ or not to ‘-ie’ indexed place, where you were from or would claim allegiance to.

The general point is threefold: indexicalities can hinge on minute differences of form, they are interpretable in situated encounters, and while necessarily context-dependent for interpretation, they be sensitive to relations of order and scale, in this case of gender [Debbie], generation [Jimmy] or place [Buddy].

**Gumperz’ on indexicality:**
John Gumperz has discussed indexicality in language in various essays, including the ‘Introduction’ to *Directions in sociolinguistics* (1972), a framing essay in *Rethinking linguistic relativity* (1996), and at some length in the *Language and interaction*. What I want to emphasize, drawing on ‘soundbites’ from John’s various work, are key features of indexicality.

First, *indexicality is a pervasive feature of language*. This quote is from *Directions*, where John is commenting on the relevance of Garfinkel’s work for Bernstein’s elaborated and restricted codes: “Indexicality refers to the fact that the interpretation of communicative acts always without exception depends upon the speakers’ background knowledge… Seen from this point of view, Elaboration and restriction are simply two different modes of signaling or calling upon background knowledge. (1972, p. 22-23).”

Second, *indexicality is central to strategic, performative language use*, including the ‘puzzling self-reflexivity’ of discourse. Two decades after *Directions*, in the volume *Rethinking Linguistic Relativity*, John asks how it comes about that “speaker and addressee can find the common ground within which to interpret an utterance”? He answers that they do so by relying on via “[c]ontext-invoking meta-messages [that] provide a powerful… system governing the inferences that constitute language understanding.” (Gumperz, 1996, p. 364). Among such metamessages are now-familiar phenomena like code-switching, which can “function[s] as an indexical signaling strategy which is employed to suggest the presuppositions in terms of which constituent messages are understood.” (p. 365).

This brings us to the third feature, that *there are different kinds of indexes*. As John says, “[I]n more general terms code-switching can be seen as one of a set of indexical/metapragmatic signs,” “contextualizational cues” which, when processed in co-occurrence with other grammatical and lexical signs, serve to construct the contextual ground for situated interpretation.” (1996, p. 366 [emphasis added]). Recently, in the book *Language and Interaction*, John has usefully distinguished between “explicitly metacommunicative signs and indirect indexicals such a contextualization cues,” arguing that the former are explicit labels for and discourse about communication, which “are readily subject of conscious manipulation whereas the latter,” contextualization cues in their wide variety, are “automatically produced below the level of consciousness.” (2002, p. 123).

**The necessary beyond: Interaction orders, indexical orders, and scale-relations**
What is important for our purposes today is to bear in mind that both the consciously metacommunicative and subconsciously indirect indexes are simultaneously operative in communicative practices. How they articulate, the explicit ideological frame and the subconsciously socialized cuing activity, is of course a vital question, but before taking up that issue, let us consider another fundamental feature of communicative practices, one discussed often by Erving Goffman, with the analytic nuances and empirical range of his oeuvre: This is that communicative practice is often layered, or laminated (Goffman, 1974, 1981). This layering need not have the same participants or the same spatial-temporal dimensions, though it often does, nor is any particular interpretation of activity or event necessarily ‘the last word’ about what is intended or achieved. In his posthumous article, The Interaction Order, Goffman (1982) reviewed many features of co-present communication, whether involving dyads of two, scores of people, or massed hundreds or thousands. He argued that the interaction order is necessarily if ‘loosely’ coupled to the rest of the social order. I want to argue that the layering or lamination of different context-potentials should be our analytic focus for understanding the ‘loose coupling’ of interaction order and social structure.

What I want to bring out, in the spirit of Goffman’s efforts, and seeing these as a complement to John’s unstinting focus on social implications of situated language use, is that the arrangements between activity frames and participation configurations can involve hundreds if not thousands of persons, and that they can be applied to various sign media, not just those involved in co-present communication.

Put otherwise, layerings of indexicals need not unfold in what interactionists like to call ‘real time’, by which they mean the here-and-now of the interactional present. Instead, layerings invoking frames, participants, and group categories are often present in literacy practices, including that mundane phenomena of our globalized world, the multilingual sign. Of these we may often ask “What is the activity hereby announced? Who is the author? Who the addressee?” In a study of multilingual language contact in institutional settings, Stef Slembrouck and Lotte Clijsters have studied the use of multilingual signs in Brugmann Hospital in Brussels. What they find is that indexically-signdated participant relations presuppose and evoke several distinct historical and spatial scales (see Clijsters, 2005; Collins & Slembrouck, 2006b, for further analysis).

A public enterprise in the officially bilingual community of Brussels, Bergmann Hospital is officially bilingual in both Dutch and French. Entrance signs display this happy linguistic détente with equivalent information given in both languages in equivalent form. In the main entrance signs, they even manage to put the two languages side-by-side, avoiding the awkward question of whether French or Dutch should be on the top. Official policy notwithstanding, large parts of Brussels, Bergmann Hospital included, are effectively francophone. This de facto francofonie is displayed in numerous ways. For example, a set of signs on a drinks machine near one of the hospital cafeteria’s present a literal layering of signs. Prominently on the front of the machine is a plastic-encased, PC-printed set of instructions in Dutch and French. Immediately underneath this sheet, partly covered, is printed card that explains, exclusively in French, what to do if the machine malfunctions. Next to that, in a corner of the machine, is a

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2 Using Dutch in Brussels in casual encounters with strangers or during service exchanges, as I’ve done, is likely to evoke stares, followed by responses in French or English.
hand-lettered note instructing customers in French not to take their drinks into the cafeteria area. The point is Goffmanian, albeit with a multilingual slant: Different authors/animations use different languages to address potential audiences, with different language proficiencies, about different aspects of the vending machine, signaling in their diversity both official language policy and prevailing practices.

There is, however, an effort to ‘upgrade Dutch’ at Brugmann, to ensure that more staff are certifiably proficient in Dutch as well as French. This program involves courses, conversation tables at lunchtime, exams, and new requirement for Dutch/French bilingualism as part of some job certifications. This effort is driven by regional government policy; it is part of the Vlaamse Gemeenschap’s various strategies for promoting Dutch; and it is buttressed by neoliberal arguments about competitiveness and attracting new, affluent Flemish populations to the hospital. The point is that in the practices we have both the immediate, situated indexicalities of signs and their actual/virtual sources and addressees, and the relations of historical and spatial scale that are often brought into play, but these are ‘in play’, never simply determined. With their efforts to upgrade Dutch, the Flemish government and the hospital language staff are attempting to equalize and thus change long-standing relations of language in Brussels. When, conversely, hospital workers refuse to participate in the inducements to learn Dutch, knowing that despite the threats they can’t be fired, they are aligning themselves, in the Goffmanian sense, but collectively, against the effort to impose new scalings of language, region, and workplace.

In a recent paper entitled “Indexical order and the dialectics of sociolinguistic life” Silverstein (2003) has laid out a detailed case for the essential interconnection between level-one indexicals of immediate situation and multiple potential levels of contextualization, what I have been referring to as layering or lamination. He argues, rightly in my view, that the micro-level is not sufficient, we do not create the world out of our interactions, our situated communicative practices. Nor, however, can we simply analyze macro-sociological plane categories. Categories of gender and generation, of class or region, are not deterministically operating at all times in uniform ways, they are evoked and brought into interaction, sometimes they are enforced, sometimes resisted, but always as part of a process.

An example of such ordering phenomenon is provided by the ‘style-shifting’ widely-reported in variationist research. Recall that such style-shifting, for example in Labov’s classic New York studies (1972), involves the statistical tendency for populations, across different social class, ethnic or gender categories, to shift from relatively non-standard to relatively standard pronunciation. This happens sharply when the research encounter shifts from one of verbal interview to one in which print is introduced. What we have is a statistically robust finding that populations of speakers will shift toward official pronunciation norms when the demands of the interactional setting are changed. In this case, when print text and the instruction, ‘please read this’ are introduced. This is a situated indexical phenomenon, certainly; it involves individuals responding to contextual exigencies, largely without conscious awareness. However, it is also a statistical phenomenon measurable across groups, and it certainly reflects the institutional/textual-linguistic regimentation of public schooling, in which learning to read is a practice to be conducted only in the standard register. I am not saying that the norm is always in effect, we know enough about ‘covert norms’ and such. In a recent
article on voice and register, Agha (2005) has demonstrated that groups can take various alignments vis a vis the introduction of non-standard varieties into public media such as television. My point is that the register-shift, from vernacular to standard, so frequently reported in the early variationist research, is a matter of different scale-levels operating in speech situations, of different indexical orders being brought to bear. And this is a matter of collective action as well as communicative practice; it concerns the ‘loose coupling’ of interaction orders and social structure.

The important lesson is that we must analyze the laminations or layering of micro and the macro-level entities in communicative practices. But there is a further task. We want to show scaling, the lamination or layering, but we also want to investigate what is laminated. In other words, we want to speak of context as well as contextualization. In a series of recent papers, Stef Slembrouck, Jan Blommaert, and myself, along with others (Arnaut, 2005; Blommaert, Collins, & Slembrouck, 2005a,b; Collins & Slembrouck, 2006a,b; see also Blommaert, 2006; Pujolar, 2006), have argued for taking the concept of historical and spatial scale seriously in thinking about the social conditions of multilingual contact. I don’t have time to rehearse that argument today; it is the subject of a session on Saturday for those interested. Rather, what I want to do is provide one last set of illustrations, exploring indexicalities of situated language use, but also implicating macro-scale processes as part of that language use.

**Scale and indexicality in migration-based multilingualism in Upstate New York**

**Inner-sphere:** In a recent project investigating migration-connected uses of Spanish and English in the Capital District region of Upstate New York, Amarilys La Santa and myself have studied multilingual language practices in both private and public arenas. In domestic settings we have found robust, intricate processes of bi and tri-lingual language practices, about which I won’t say more today, beyond noting that Blom & Gumperz (1972) called ‘situational code-switching’ is richly exemplified. Language choice creates as well as presupposes participants in communicative events (see Collins & Slembrouck, 2006b, for data and analysis).

**Outer sphere:** If domestic multilingualism is robust in the migrant households we’ve studied, then the public linguistic realm in Upstate New York is quite different. Put most briefly, there is something like a symbolic division, phrasable as a principle for practice: “Spanish with the inner world, English with the outer world”. This can be said to operate across a number of settings and across spoken and written modalities. Whether it is telephone answering behavior by staff or the presumed readers of product labels in ethnic markets; the projected audience of Puerto Rican or Mexican restaurant menus; the code-switching that children or adults engage in at social events or pre-school programs; or even the ways in which Hispanic advocacy centers present themselves through public signage, there seems to be a simple principle operating. It can be paraphrased as follows: “switch to English for English speakers, and assume that the world outside this known group is English-speaking.”

I would suggest that this is the effect of an imposition of scale, the scale of nations, reflecting a long-term conflictual relation, of more than a century, pitting a United States that sees itself as Anglophone and white, against a Mexico or Puerto Rico, which are seen as Spanish-speaking and brown (De Genova, 2005; Urciuoli, 1996). Like
the imposition of standard register described above, the principle of ‘English first’ is not always operative, but it is a frequently encountered principle of indexical order.

Reversals: However, I don’t want to end with this general, cross-contextual principle of presumptive English monolingualism, but rather take up a case of apparent reversal. As already noted, in our research we encountered very little public Spanish-language use or bilingual signage, even on stores or community centers that *internally* were active zones of Spanish use and Spanish-English bilingualism. Although Spanish has a robust domestic life, so to speak, and has an effective role in the workplace, it has little public life in the Albany region. We were therefore quite interested to be present at a public “Hispanic Heritage Celebration” that was held in the City of Albany’s City Hall in September 2005. At this event a striking pattern of code use and code alternation occurred.

The overall event consisted of speeches, food, dances, songs, and music. Before the ceremonial beginnings, people milled about ‘meeting and greeting’, hugs were exchanged, kisses and handclasps. You could hear rapid conversations in Spanish as well as English, and frequently in a rapid switching between languages. It seemed as if the zone of the domestic had widened.

The event formally began with speeches of welcome from local politicians and dignitaries as well as from local Latino activists and community leaders. First the mayor of the city greeted the audience, extolling the virtues of cultural diversity and Albany and the United States’ rich immigrant history. He spoke in English. The County Executive then followed. He said similar things, but differently. An Irish-American from an established political family, he nonetheless addressed the audience entirely in Spanish. After him, staff members from the offices of a state legislator and state senator, both of who are local and Anglophone, also made speeches of welcome on behalf of the officials, and they spoke entirely in Spanish. It seemed at this point something quite unexpected had happened: this very public, formal event had shifted into Spanish. But then, after three speeches of welcome in Spanish, four Hispanic leaders and representatives from Hispanic organizations made their welcoming remarks. These four all addressed the audience in English.

This pattern of public code alternation admits numerous readings. If it is an example of situational code-switching, we must ask why the ethnolinguistically-inappropriate are using Spanish and English. If it is as an example of code-alternation to evoke different potential ‘audiences’ from among the assembled persons, then what audiences are being addressed, and what alignments are being signalled? Before proceeding further, let us recall that there were two differing patterns of code-alternation. First, there was the off-stage talk, the rapid, informal code-switching found among many of the audience during the event, testifying to shifting groups with differing language capacities came, and showing affinities with the kinds of topic-relationship-and-code affinities we had found in domestic settings. Secondly, there was the on-stage talk, the careful presentation of formal ‘welcoming remarks’, maintaining a consistency of frame across multiple speakers, with presumptive Anglophones addressing the audience completely in Spanish, and presumptive Spanish-speakers addressing the audience completely in English. Although this might be as simply an event-specific ‘celebration of bilingualism’, in the careful maintenance of code, and the identity of speakers, most interpreters of the event saw other scale relations as well.
One interpretation, repeated by local people with whom we discussed the event, both Spanish-English bilinguals and Anglophone monolinguals, was that the political officials were making an appeal for constituent sympathies, ‘speaking to the people in their own language,’ even though it is a language that is not otherwise used in the conduct of official business. This pattern of language alternation might be seen as activity tuned to the local and state level calendar of multicultural acknowledgment. Within the perspective of New York State, a state in which Hispanics are a considerable voting bloc and have political influence, the Hispanic Heritage Celebration is part of an official ‘multicultural’ calendar (there is Hispanic Heritage in September and, for example, History Month in February). It is within that political-cultural calendar, we may understand the Heritage Celebration, with its celebratory tone regarding culturally and linguistically diverse citizens in the city. In this special time, the politicians were exercising what Bourdieu called ‘condescension strategies’ (1984).

There was however, also the pattern of language use by the Latino community activists and leaders. Interpreters saw this behavior as acknowledging the de facto dominance of English, as the language of official business and official places. Here interpretation implicated what I have term the sociolinguistic scale of the nation-state, the relations between the US, Mexico, and Puerto Rico. (These are often characterized by what Ana Celia Zentella call ‘Hispanophobia’ (1997)). One consultant, a Puerto Rican man who has lived in New York City as well as the Albany region for two decades, explicitly referred to the principle we described above, which is for Spanish/English bilinguals to switch to English when there are non-Spanish-speakers in the participation frame. This person, born and raised in Puerto Rico, also suggested that perhaps the activists, being US-born and raised, lacked confidence in their Spanish-language proficiencies. In this judgment of possible anxiety about Spanish proficiencies, he took an Islanders view of mainland immigrants. The significance here – and this is a point taken directly from Gumperz’ work on conversational inference and code-switching (1982), is that code-alternation attracts different interpretations of what it might mean, for those who share the languages, have similar sociocultural backgrounds, or share neither. In the case at hand, the choices of language in relation to potential audiences, invokes a politics of place, a claim to or imposition of identity, a scale shift, from the normal time of a place with no public Spanish, to a place of carefully orchestrated Spanish in relation to English, albeit with unexpected sources and virtual or imagined audiences.

Conclusion
In order to understand such common-enough complexities, we need the conceptual tools of indexicality, part of a long tradition of the analysis of communicative practices, in which John Gumperz’ legacy is to have provided theoretical focus, analytical and methodological clarity, as well as broad empirical reach. We need also what Erving Goffman enables us to see about language and activity: That multiple frames and participation alignments are possible, indeed common, in the rituals of everyday and public life; that the interactional order involves a layering or laminating of features of person, task, and semiotic resource drawn from different levels of the ‘macrosociological’. Our task, engaging with these legacies, is to build upon them while also devoting attention to the theoretical and methodological issues raised by the questions of scale in our sociolinguistic analysis. Questions of scale are raised sharply in
the study of transnational migration and the forms of social, cultural, and linguistic contact it brings about.
References


