



BOOK SYMPOSIUM

## Toward an anthropology of intersubjectivity

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Comment on Duranti, Alessandro. 2015. *The anthropology of intentions: Language in a world of others*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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Alessandro Duranti's 2015 book has the form of a career-long compendium. It is a reflective resynthesis of his ideas about the relative importance and unimportance of calculating mental states ("intentions"—but the term is rightly scrutinized by Duranti and his correspondents Teun van Dijk and Jason Throop for its multiple senses), when engaged in everyday action and interaction. After reviewing some of the history of anthropological critiques of Speech Act philosophy, the book's chapters move from a re-presentation of Duranti's important early observations in a Samoan political meeting (where blame for a bad outcome is not linked to the accusers' understanding that the fault was "unintended"), to a general linguistic-anthropological critique of the very idea that, as propounded by John Searle, we should base our analysis of utterances in interaction on the notion of context-insensitive, preformed and explicit mental plans made by individuals all on their own. This critique is effectively reinforced by an illustration of the ways that audiences in a US election campaign were instrumental in constructing the final meanings of one candidate's speeches in different ways under different contextual conditions. All in all, the case for rejection of Searle-style intentionality as the prime motor for action and interaction is convincingly re-posed. But Duranti is also clearly unwilling to abandon altogether the idea that interaction is in fact universally based at some level on sensitivity to others' mental states, and the book concludes with an extended proposal that Husserl's notion of intersubjectivity will do what Searle's intentionality (even his notion of "we-intentions") has not done,



and provide a plausible universal account of mental-state sensitivity as the basic underpinning for human interaction.

As I understand it, Duranti's embrace of Husserl in this volume and elsewhere (Duranti 2010) represents his effort to systematize an acknowledgement that—as I would also maintain—any observed interactional effect from cultural stances of anti-mentalism has always been partial and contextualized. While ethnographic reports of anti-mentalism effects have sometimes been so surprising as to engender near-incredulity (as reported, for instance, in Robbins 2008), no description has ever actually rendered the relevant interactions unrecognizable as such to the outsider. It seems that we do need some general account of how mental-state-sensitivity plays out in interaction—but one that will be alert both to the realities of social life and to the consequential possibilities of cultural construal in this domain. No doubt Duranti is correct that Husserl's brand of mentalism will serve better than that of Searle as this general account, especially with respect to the fact that most interactional moves have some social rather than purely individual components. With respect to the ongoing question of finding a place for cross-cultural variability in attitudes to others' mental states, however, and the relative importance of such variability for the conduct of actual interaction, it is not immediately clear that Husserl is an improvement on Searle.

As Duranti explains Husserl's intersubjectivity, it is the key concept of mentally "trading places" with another subjectivity (Husserl 1989: 177, cited in Duranti 2015: 229) that makes perception of an objective reality possible. Because I can imagine what this table looks like to another person, I can be sure that my own perception of the table is not mere illusion or solipsism. I confidently constitute in my mind the objective reality of the table because I have prior empathic evidence of its intersubjective reality—its reality to your perception as well as to mine. The point is clear: sensitivity to the mental states of others not only psychologically precedes but actually makes possible the sense of an objective world accessible to an individual's senses. Explicit individual attitudes and intentions can only be formed on the basis of this, originally other-oriented, substrate.

There is no doubt that such a socially-oriented view of the role of mental states in interaction has more appeal to the anthropologist than does Searle's very individualist account. But the proposal that we take Husserl's ideas as the platform for all understanding of human interaction everywhere is not subjected by Duranti to the same empirical scrutiny with which he treats Searle. For example, it should be possible to ask (and to begin to answer) the question to what extent and in which of many possible senses does intersubjective knowledge empirically "precede" other kinds of knowledge? We know, for example, that young children often take some developmental time to show us that they can adopt others' perspectives. Precedence might also be interrogated with respect to real-time processing during adult interactions, in human evolution, with respect to logical priority, and so on.

It also seems clear that empathetically "trading places" with others is just what holders of an Opacity doctrine about others' minds (Robbins and Rumsey 2008) have said that they don't do. And, indeed, Duranti himself has shown that there are some occasions at least on which they can be observed not to do it. Are there then culturally inflected contexts in which the effects of intersubjective knowledge are mitigated or in which it does not apply? What is going on, for example, when we

observe that even middle-class US actors do not always take quite simple aspects of their interlocutors' perspectives into account (Barr and Keysar 2005)? What, in short, is the strength of the evidence for—and perhaps especially against—the proposed omnipresence of intersubjective knowledge in human life and interaction?

While Duranti cannot be faulted for limiting himself to presenting a general philosophical proposal and leaving it for others to question its global applicability, it does seem odd that the very questions about cultural specificity which would tend to weaken the intersubjectivity view that Duranti (2015) espouses are those which he himself has already mobilized—not only in his other publications but in the early chapters of this very same book—to challenge Searle. If Samoan disinterest in actors' mental states was enough to throw a wrench into Searle's mentalist philosophy, then surely this is also true of Husserl's?

This uneasy match between the data from Samoa, tending to downplay the importance of mental state calculation in interaction, and the theoretical move toward a universalizing philosophy that makes fundamental use of such calculation, lies at the heart of this book, and remains unresolved. If I may engage in some mental-state attribution of my own, I believe that the uneasiness arises from the fact that Duranti is mainly concerned in this book with achieving the comparison of Husserl with Searle, and with showing how Husserl is preferable on general linguistic-anthropological grounds. I believe that Duranti's main interest here is, in short, mostly to replace Searle with a better intentionalist. If so, then the reality is that the presentation of the Samoan material (including some impressive philological investigations which document the rise of intentionality-relevant meanings in Samoan words under the influence of Christianity) is not germane to the effort. The US material from the election campaign does a good job of showing why Husserl is preferable to Searle, but the Samoan material actually raises rather damaging possibilities that, if taken to their logical limits, would vitiate the claims of both philosophers. This explains why, by the end of the book, the reader ends up feeling not entirely certain of the extent to which Duranti (2015) does or does not stand by his earliest claims that (inter)action and accountability are not in all parts of the world equivalently dependent on others' readings of actors' intentions and states of mind.

In previous work, Duranti (2010) has worked to resolve the conflict between the implications of his Samoan data and his commitment to Husserl's philosophy of intersubjectivity by making use of the concept of multiple "layers" or "levels" of interactional access to intersubjective knowledge. This would mean that we could admit "top down" influences on interaction, from ideology and cultural beliefs, as well as Husserl's own "bottom up" influences from primary intersubjectivity. While appeal to levels of intersubjective access is not a focus of Duranti (2015), it remains to my mind one of the more promising avenues for inspiring a more culturally sensitive and empirically investigable version of intersubjectivity in interaction.

Let us consider the minimum architecture of levels that might be needed to take account of what we know about mental-state sensitivity across cultures. The kind of intersubjectivity that Husserl discusses (call it Level One) is surely too much prior to the objective world and too reliant on alignment of perspectives between Ego and Other to be truly concerned with the realities of deception, suspicion, opposition, and incommensurability of perspectives that are unavoidable in the world

of actual human interaction. We could propose that this primary level of intersubjectivity operates in terms of an innate, intuitive assumption of generalized sociality but does not engage with the actual, busily variable, contents of specific Others' minds. At Level Two, however, concern with such specificities is paramount. This would be the level at which interactants encounter the reality that others' minds are not in fact always fully transparent or comprehensible, that they may sometimes be deliberately occluded or misrepresented, or that we may merely suspect that this is the case (for fuller treatment, see papers in Danziger and Rumsey 2013). It is also at this level that cultural attitudes—for example, about the general trustworthiness of others and the knowability of others' minds—might be expected to make some difference to interaction. If, as among the Mopan Maya (Danziger 2006, 2010, 2013), it is believed that speech and action are directly linked to the wellbeing of the cosmos, and that false speech brings evil material consequences regardless of a speaker's mental states or intentions, then speakers will be unwilling to speak when uncertain of their facts, and artistic genres which flout the truth (fiction, novel poetic metaphor) will be hard to find. If, on the other hand, as among the Ku Waru, it is believed that social others are little to be trusted, children may be socialized to expect and react to deception from an early age (Rumsey 2013).

Level One will by hypothesis be universal across cultures, and will motivate the general, almost always unconscious, assumptions that make interaction possible at all, and which also make it largely comparable across all cultures and contexts. Loosely following Rappaport (1999) and Peirce (1955 [1931–35]), we could propose then that a third level also exists, at which explicit conventional strategies and moralities are mobilized in an attempt to ensure the trustworthiness of social others that was assumed at Level One and called into question at Level Two. It is at Level Three, for example, that we will find the cultural preference either for solemn oaths or for sincere promises, where we will see moral credit being awarded (or not) for “trying” but not succeeding, and where we will discover whether “I didn't mean it!” is a reliable way to avoid punishment for wrongdoing.

It should be clear that each successively numbered level depends by hypothesis on the existence of the one “below” it. It should also be clear that influences on what observers will see at Level Two (the actual conduct of everyday interaction) will come both from Level One (the level of largely unconscious assumption of universal sociality) and from Level Three (the level of conventional morality and institutions).

My quickly sketched model shows only in the most rough and ready way the kinds of distinctions that will be needed if we are to account both for the culturally particular and the globally universal in the role of mental states in human interactions. But Duranti (2015) has shown us clearly that a Searle-based anthropology of intentions is a doomed enterprise. It is time to take the next step in feeling out the possibilities for a true anthropology of intersubjectivity.

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