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JOHN GUMPERZ 1922 – 2013

A pioneer in the fields of ethnography of communication and sociolinguistics, John Gumperz was one of the best known linguistic anthropologists of his generation. Within this paradigm, he developed such fundamental concepts as code-switching and contextualization cues, through which he integrated field study of linguistic processes with sociological concerns about social networks, social identity, and fair access to institutional resources.

Hans-Josef Gumperz was born on January 9, 1922, in Hattingen, Germany. As a Jewish youth he was barred by Nazi racial laws from attending high school. He moved to Italy to study and later spent time in a Dutch refugee camp before moving to the United States with his family in 1939. He Americanized his name to John Joseph Gumperz not long afterward.

John Gumperz earned a bachelor's degree in chemistry from the University of Cincinnati in 1947 and embarked on graduate work in that field at the University of Michigan. But he soon became fascinated by the idea that language itself could be an object of scientific scrutiny, and switched to a graduate program in linguistics. Gumperz became interested in sociolinguistic problems while working on his doctoral dissertation, a study of the Swabian dialect spoken by a community of farmers in Washtenaw County, Michigan, who had descended from two groups of German immigrants originally speaking different dialects. He argued that the linguistic convergence he had observed in this community could be attributed to social formations that resulted after settlement in the United States. This correlation between speech and social groups would form the investigative backbone of his subsequent research, and would be the primary focus of his second fieldwork: a collaborative community study in northern India (1954-56). The only linguist in a team of anthropologists, sociologists, economists, and other social scientists, he broadened his interests to include fieldwork methods and the relationship between language, culture, and society.

Upon returning from this fieldwork, Gumperz was invited to establish a Hindi-Urdu program at the University of California at Berkeley. In 1964, he became a member of Berkeley's anthropology department and a leader in the university's new Language Behavior Research Laboratory. In the mid-1960s, Berkeley witnessed a serendipitous confluence of scholars from different disciplines—philosophy (Grice and Searle), linguistics (Fillmore, Lakoff, and Kay), education (Slobin), and psychology (Ervin-Tripp)—who shared Gumperz's interest in the relationship between linguistic meaning and the inferential processes of communication. For the next thirty years, Gumperz would combine teaching at Berkeley with numerous research projects in the United States and abroad.

Through in-depth fieldwork in Norway, northern and central India, Austria, Slovenia, the United States, and England, he collected ethnographic data that furthered his understanding of communication in the context of social boundaries and sociolinguistic structures. Gumperz's development of the ethnography of

communication evolved through his studies of the way language is used by people in different social networks, and the way these networks are produced and reproduced in communication. He was among the first scholars to note that linguistic diversity correlates with social stratification, so that highly stratified systems (such as the caste system in India) develop highly diversified communicative styles to mark the social identity of group members as well as the exclusion of non-members. More egalitarian communities (such as the one he studied with Jan-Petter Blom in Norway), on the other hand, necessitate a much smaller linguistic repertoire to mark social boundaries.

Because of his observation of bilingual and language contact situations, Gumperz abandoned the traditional focus on language systems as distinct entities, electing to investigate instead multilingual phenomena such as code-switching. The study of code-switching (the juxtaposition of passages of speech belonging to two or more different grammatical systems) allowed him to gain a deeper understanding of the inferential and interpretive processes present in the communication of multilingual speakers. Moreover, Gumperz realized that code-switching is only one of several discourse strategies that provide interlocutors with contextual information about how to interpret communicative intent. The proper interpretation of what he labeled contextualization cues—such as prosody and rhythm—requires interactants to have intimate knowledge of the communicative styles and practices of particular social networks; failure to attend to the proper cues leads to potentially catastrophic communication breakdowns.

His concern with the large-scale sociological effects of small-scale interactions together with the legacy of his personal history led to a constant preoccupation with social justice and gave his work an important applied perspective. Most notably, he collaborated with BBC to produce *Crosstalk*, a popular documentary on the problems faced by individuals (mostly immigrants) who are unable to use the appropriate codes in institutional encounters. Moreover, he became one of the few sociolinguists to serve as an expert witness in court cases involving cross-cultural miscommunications.

He is survived by his second wife and long-time collaborator, Jenny Cook-Gumperz, professor of education at the University of California in Santa Barbara; a sister, Lore; two children from his first marriage, Andrew and Jenny Gumperz; and two grandchildren.

John Gumperz leaves an enormous legacy: the knowledge that language cannot be unbundled from the whole social context and that, in complex urban societies, understanding communication is an essential component in tackling injustice. His ideas will endure in the work of his many students, who will forever be grateful for his gentle but sharp guidance. He will be missed but he will, also, always be remembered for his positive attitude, warmth, and generosity.

Marco Jacquemet