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Reflections on understanding, alignment, the social mind, and language in interaction

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1. We are not mind readers (even of our own mind)

In vernacular language we often take remarks like "I understand what you are saying" or "I know what you mean" to name some sort of mental process and resulting mental state. We take understanding to be something that happens in the mind. But, of course, when we talk to each other we have no access to other people's mental states.

In fact, modern research on the mind shows that the vast majority of what goes on in our heads is unconscious and encapsulated from the parts of our brain that consciously process and rationalize information and decisions (Buonomano 2011; Dennett 1969; Gazzaniga 2011; Gee 2013; Hood 2012; Kahneman 2011; Kean 2014; Macknit and Martinez-Conde 2010; McRaney 2011; Tomasello 2014; Swaab 2014). Thus, we are not even aware of most of our own mental processes and states. Often what we think we know consciously is "fabulation", the sense we try to make of processes and decisions in our minds that we are not consciously privy to.

Indeed, some neuroscientists call the conscious part of the mind "the interpreter" (Gazzaniga 2011), because what it does is interpret, the best it can, ideations, emotions, and decisions made by brain modules to which we have access only to their outputs (decisions) and not to their internal workings or the data they processed to reach a decision (about how to think, feel, or do). They are encapsulated. Of course, some of our actions and decisions are based on courses of rational reasoning carried by our "slow mind", but much of what we do and think — and even much of what underlies the rational processes of our slow mind — are the products of our "fast mind" (Kahneman 2011), the parts of our brain that operate quickly, heuristically, and via inheritances from our biological past and experiential makeup outside of conscious awareness.

So, ironically perhaps, even when we interpret ourselves — our own thinking, intending, and speaking — we are not actually, for the most part accurately

assessing internal mental states. Even less are we doing so when we interpret what others say, mean, and do. So whatever the mind does to sub-serve understanding, it should not be called "understanding" or, at least, it should be distinguished from understanding and interpretation as social and conventional communicative acts. For language users, understanding is a public and social state (Gee 1990, 1992, 1999). It is hard to see how it could be anything else since, as I already pointed out above, we are not privy to anyone's internal states including much of our own.

Gadamer (2004) claimed that "It is not that the understanding is subsequently put into words; rather, the way understanding occurs…is the coming-into-language of the thing itself" (p. 386). My view here is similar, but I argue here not that "the way understanding occurs … is the coming-into-language of the thing itself", but, rather, that the way understanding occurs is the coming-into-language-in-and-as-social-and-cultural-interaction of the thing itself.

There are various varieties of academic theories about how people, when they talk and interact, accommodate to, align with, adapt to, or even imitate each other. Some of this work is based on ideas about mirror neurons, ideas that are, at times, more popular than true (Hickok 2014; Rizzolatti and Craighero 2004). It is clear that not only is understanding a public and social affair, but it is also often the product of interactional *work* people do with each other and with the world. Indeed, we sometimes talk about our attempts and struggles to understand each other and things in and about the world. We can say things like "As hard as I try, I'm not just getting this" or "Let's really try to understand each other". We are sometimes well aware when understanding is not working and not from the inspection of other people's heads or even our own, but from reflection on what is going on in interaction and the world.

2. The public work of understanding

How we ought to characterize the work that understanding as a public and social process often entails is a major issue for any theory of understanding. Terms like "alignment" are probably part of the picture, but not all of it. And it is important to see how such terms fit with the larger processes of interactional work we engage in to achieve understanding across people, social groups, institutions, and cultures.

One problem with psychologically oriented work on interaction and understanding is that such work greatly simplifies who we are when we communicate. It tends to talk about two people aligning, let's say, to each other, but is silent on who we are when we speak to each other. When we speak we must speak as some sort of *who* engaged in some sort of *what* (Gee 1990, 1999, 2015). The listener, in order to engage in the work of interpretation, must know who the speaker is trying to be

here and now. Is so-and-so speaking now as my doctor or my friend? As a fellow Native-American, as a fellow professional in a shared profession, as a "stranger"? Is so-and-so speaking as a scientist, an activist, an "everyday person" (trading on "common sense")? Is so-and-so speaking as a street gang member, a struggling student, or a civically-concerned youth?

The listener, in order to engage in the work of interpretation, must also know what the speaker is trying to do here and how (Gee 1990, 1999, 2015). Is so-and-so offering medical advice or personal help? Is so-and-so recruiting me to a cause or bonding to me as a friend? Is so-and-so trying to convince me in an argument or vent opinions that he, perhaps mistakenly, thinks we share? Is so-and-so trying to con me or authentically recruit my help?

We are each capable of enacting (or trying to enact) multiple *whos*, that is, multiple sorts of socially meaningful identities ("kinds of people", Hacking 1986, 1994). If and when we align to each other in talk and interaction we are aligning to the *identity* we take the speaker to be trying to enact here and now, not to the person *per se* as some substance unseen behind all the social attributes we humans can enact and manipulate.

Any words and deeds can constitute different types of action or activity depending on who is speaking where, why, and when. We align to what action we take that person, in their current social guise, as attempting to perform, not to words out of context or to meaning as some substance unseen laying behind all the social and worldly features that cloak the "stage" on which we act (the world in which we move, the contexts in which we reside and which we change and, in part, create). This is not to deny that words and phrase have system meaning (general meanings determined by the grammatical system of the language). Rather, it is to claim that it is situational meaning (meanings fit to contexts of use) that are important for discourse and communication (Barsalou 1999a, b; Bergin 2012; Clark 1989, 1997; Cosmides 1989; Gallese 2007; Gee 2004; Glenberg 1997; Glenberg and Robertson 1999; Glenberg and Gallese 2012; Halliday 1978; Tomasello 1999; Wason 1996, 1968; Wilson 2002). "Coffee" has a system meaning, but has different situational meanings in "The coffee spilled, go get a mop", "The coffee spilled, go get a broom", and "The coffee spilled, stack it again".

It is important to see that language as system ("grammar") and mental processing sub-serve processes of situationally identifying identities and activities, as well as the meanings of words and phrases — and it is important to know how they do so — but they do not constitute them. Being a *who* (identity) engaged in a *what* (activity) is a performance of a sort, visible in the world and situated within ongoing, but changing, social conventions. If there are no conventions (social agreements and alignments) there is no understanding to be had, no matter what you do in your head [this point was well covered by Wittgenstein (1953) both in

his beetle in the box discussion (Paragraph. 293) and in his there are no private languages argument (Paragraphs 244–271) — see Kripke 1982 as well].

3. Big "D" discourses

I have elsewhere (Gee 1990, 1992, 1999, 2015) used the term "Discourse" with a capital "D" ("big 'D' Discourses") to name specific ways of enacting or recognizing socially significant identities and their associated socially significant activities (or practices). A Discourse is a set of ways of speaking (writing), acting, interacting, valuing, dressing, using objects, tools, and technologies in specific sorts of places and at specific sorts of times in order to get recognized as enacting a socially significant identity. A Discourse is a dance with words, deeds, and things.

Being a birder, African-American, radical feminist, lawyer, gang member, biker, linguist, an "everyday person", graduate student, gamer (each of a certain sort or type) are all Discourses. In Ian Hacking's terms Discourses are ways of enacting and recognizing certain "kinds of people". Discourses are not discrete units, but waves that can flow into each other, overlap, and align or conflict with each other. They are contestable, negotiable, and more or less flexible across different contexts. They change across time and appear and disappear across history (e.g., St. Simeon Stylites in the Fifth Century CE lived for 37 years on top of pillar and was recognized as a saint; today he would get recognized as either a performance artist or a mental patient and would have lasted on the pillar a much shorter time).

When we speak we use grammatical resources to design what we want to communicate with special reference for who (in terms of some Discourse-oriented identity or identities) we take the recipient to be and what sort of response we want or anticipate. This is call "recipient design" (Sacks and Schegloff 1974). This means that of necessity we orient to who we are talking to. We also use grammatical resources to design what we want to communicate with special reference to our stance toward what we are saying and doing — how we feel about, what attitudes we have to it, and how we see it as situated in terms of evidence and context. This means we orient to what we are saying and trying to do in saying it. This we can call "content design" (Gee 2015).

Hearers must, in turn, orient to speaker's recipient design and content design. This means, following Gumperz (1982), that they must decipher the grammatical design-features speakers have used in order to garner from them contextualization cues from what has been said and how it has been said, so as to pick up guides, clues, or cues to what they speaker means in the specific context in which the interaction is going on. Hearers need to use contextualization cues to guide and help

them in their work of assigning words and phrases situational meaning in context with due respect for the speaker's intentions.

4.   The social mind

Let me clarify what I mean by "with due respect for the speaker's intentions". As we have said, humans have no real access to the inner workings of other people's minds. They do not even have conscious access to most of what goes on in their own minds. And they do not need these things in order to communicate. Human social and cultural groups have conventions about what counts as having an "intention", what counts as understanding, what counts as a "correct" interpretation. These terms in actuality are social. They are the products of social conventions and social and interactional work. They do not name or need to name private mental processes.

Psychologists seek to study things like intention, understanding, and interpretation as mental entities. Discourses analysts study them in terms of the social and cultural conventions in terms of which people make assumptions and ascriptions and assign responsibility about such things. The mind is, in discourse, treated as social and socially negotiable. In dealing with communication, "intention" is a social and cultural notion that is "figured out" in the process of discovering/learning situational meanings. This is one sense in which the mind is social.

There is another important sense in which the mind is social (Gee 1992, 2004, 2015). We humans give situational meanings to language and the world by using our past experiences to guess what things mean in current contexts. So what does a white tail flash of a bird flying into tall grass mean to you? Depending on your past experience it might mean just a bird; a bird commonly, but only partially, seen hiding in tall grass; or a "Bobolink" (because, in most of the United States, the only bird flying in and around such grass lands that shows a patch of white on its hind quarters is a Bobolink — in a forest environment it would have been a Northern Flicker).

What does the "Big Coffee is as bad as Big Oil" mean? To know what it means you have to have been previously privy to long-running societal conversations about big business and corporate greed. What does it mean to call a corporation a "person"? To know this you have to have heard or read about some rather convoluted legal reasoning and history in the Unites States.

If words and the world are going to mean anything remotely similar to different people these people have to have shared enough experience and paid the right sorts of attention to it in order to assign remotely similar situational meanings to words or things. But people left to their own devices will have very different

experiences and furnish their minds with these experiences. What ensures commonalty here are Discourses — like birders, gangs, professions, activists, and so forth — that see to it that "members" have the "right" sorts of experience and pay attention to the elements of these experiences in the "right" way so that they fill up their heads in ways similar to other people interested in the same purposes, values, or goals. The mind is social because Discourses norm what experiences it fills up with and how they experiences are "edited". Of course, we are all parts of many different social groups and so our minds are made up of socially-significant different (but interacting) identities and social varieties of language (dialects, registers, social languages).

If two people are to align with each other in conversation they must do so in part through recruiting enough shared experience to know what words and things can mean mutually to and for each other in terms of what identities and activities (practices) are relevant here and now. It is not just people that are aligning, but Discourses that are aligning (and communicating or miscommunicating with each other). When Harry talks to Sally it might also be an instance of the Discourse of male tech-nerds communicating (or miscommunicating) with the Discourse of back-to-nature radical environmentalists or, perhaps, a graduate student communicating to a doctoral advisor in the Discourse of Graduate School (in some disciplinary guise). We align with others both as individuals with our own unique life histories (trajectories through Discourses across time and space) and as Discourses (kinds of people) talking to each other.

This is, by the way, just what it means to say language and meaning are conventional. Social conventions always mean that individual interactions also "mimic" (never perfectly and always more or less) what others have done before in the name of social, institutional, and historical replication or reproduction. This fact is also what unites the micro (interactional) and macro (societal/institutional) in talk and text.

5. An example

Let me close with one example of how the approach I have taken here would apply to discourse analysis applied to some data (Gee 1999, 2010). Below is a conversation that occurred after a formal meeting had ended and some people had left and others had stayed a while to "chat". The meeting had been a session of a project in which professors from a university and school teachers were working together to create an oral history curriculum for middle-school students. The professors and the teachers were in a post-industrial working-class town on the East Coast of the United States.

There were town-gown problems in the project, since the teachers were third-generation natives of the town who had used teaching to enter the middle class and the professors were mobile professionals at a private colleges and had not been born in and did not, for the most part, intend to stay in the town. There were also conflicts in the meetings at times due to differences between the Discourses of college professors (in education and history) and middle-school teachers in the town (i.e., in how they enacted and recognized socially significant identities and activities and how, based on past experiences, they gave words and phrases situational meanings).

In the transcript below Sara is a professor of history and Carol and Janet are middle-school teachers in the same school and friends. Joe is a curriculum coordinator at another middle-school in town. Carol, Janet, and Joe are "natives" and Sara is not (she was born elsewhere and is now no longer there).

Carol:
1. My mother used to talk about in the 40s /
2. You'd hang around at Union Station/
3. And anybody would just pick you up /
4. Because everybody was going down to dance at Bright City /
5 Whether you knew them or not //

Joe:
6. Lakeside Ballroom //

Janet:
7. Yeah definitely //

Joe:
8. My father used to work there //

Janet:
9. And also, once you finally get into the war situation /
10. Because you have Fort Derby /
11. Everybody would get a ride in to come to Bright City /
12. To the amusement park //
13. So it was this influx of two, three cars worth of guys /
14. That were now available to meet the girls that suddenly were there //

Sara:
15. Well actually street, street cars had just come in in this /
16. And as I recall um from a student who wrote a paper on this /
17. Bright City and Park was built by the street car company /
18. In order to have it a sort of target destination for people to go to /
19. And to symbiotically make money off of this //

Janet:
20. Because once you got there /
21. You could take a boat ride /
22. And go up and down a lake /
23. And there were lots of other ways to get the money from people //

There is lots we could say about this interaction, but here I will focus on only a few points relevant to the discussion of language and Discourses in this paper. This "chat" follows a meeting in which the participants had been speaking as teachers and professors. Now Carol, Janet, and Joe are speaking as long-time "natives" of the town. They are bonding around their shared knowledge and history as natives, enacting their identities as such natives. They are speaking in their vernacular style of language as "everyday people" (what I call their lifeworld Discourse) who share knowledge and experiences that make them the same or similar "kinds of people" in their identities as "natives".

Such a conversation puts Sara at a disadvantage, since she is not a native and does not share their experiences as natives. When she attempts to participate she cannot enact the identity of a native. So, she enacts her identity as an historian using "facts" from a paper and speaking just a bit away from the vernacular towards academic language (e.g., "target destination", "symbiotically", the passive construction in line 17). Sara is aligning with the natives in terms of content and topic (and by a mostly vernacular style of language), but is treating that content and topic not as shared memory but as text-based.

This attempt at alignment in one way does not work well. Sara's "well actually" sounds like she is correcting the natives' knowledge. Her remarks seem to imply that text-based evidence trumps oral evidence based on shared memories, an implication that does not sit well with a project in which Sara is helping the teachers to get their students to engage in oral history as a valid form of historical research and a valid source of evidential claims in history. Her remark that the street car company built Bright City and Park to make money is related to a common academic approach is which academics stress how systems (the macro level) often have properties that are not apparent on the ground level (the micro level) to the participants in these systems, who, in some sense, "mis-recognize" the workings or "intentions" of the system. What for the natives is a site of meet-ups for men and women (and resulted in many of the children of the next generation — and is thus part of the origin story of the natives) becomes for Sara a part of the workings of institutions and capitalism.

In another way, though, Sara's bid to participate does work because Janet "redeems" it. She does so by a common conversational move. Sara had changed the topic (from meet-ups to money) but continued to speak topically (by introducing

new content in a way that still tied to and was introduced as relevant to the content of the previous topic). Janet in turn changes the topic back to the original one, but speaks topically by tying to and incorporating Sara's topic. Janet aligns "ways of making money" and the multiple activities at the park, all of which were part and parcel of the "dates" men and women had their as they bonded during the war. Janet's "And there were lots of other ways to get money from people" concedes Sally's point and, with the phrase "get money from people", picks up on Sally's implication that people were being "used" for profit or, in some sense, "duped" or manipulated.

Janet's move is quite possibly an example of courtesy and alignment to down-play conflict. I say this because in the project as a whole it was a common move for both the professors and the teachers to avoid conflict enough to get their common task accomplished. However, this sometimes meant mitigating, effacing, and not confronting genuine differences in values, epistemology, perspectives, and taken-for-granted assumptions. In this respect, "alignment" can become evasion and a way of, ironically, perpetuating the lack of alignment, respect, and understanding among Discourses.

This simple example is meant to suggest that ideas about alignment needed to be worked out at several different levels, levels which are never really discrete. People align (and dis-align) at the levels of talk (phonologically, intonationally, syntactically, semantically, pragmatically), interactional styles, language styles (social languages, registers, dialects), speech genres (Bakhtin's 1986), figured worlds (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain 1998), and Discourses. I have, of course, not dealt with all these here, but my point generally is that that communication is a conventional dance with room for invention carried out by people and their Discourses *in situ* and not in their "private" minds. Linguistics ought to be the study of not just language, but of how in talk and text language as system (grammar) and language as situational meaning (or, better put, people situating meanings in contexts of use) mediates between the micro and macro in the production and reproduction of society.

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