In memory of John J. Gumperz: a personal remembrance in two voices

Helena Calsamiglia and Amparo Tusón

Translated by Emilee Moore

I. Period of discovery

Helena Calsamiglia

To start with, we need to go back to the final days of Franco, to a period when Spanish universities lacked resources, initiative and innovation. Times, however, were changing. It had been three years (1973) since I had come to work in the new Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, created in the late sixties. Airs of profound renewal of university education had catapulted a host of new, progressive teaching faculties. University-based Schools of Education were founded, which granted teacher-training university status for the first time. I joined a new School that was proposing to recover the republican tradition of Catalan pedagogy, and to propose new ideas for the future democratic society that was emerging. The old structures were reeling under pressure from teachers and students, at a time when universities welcomed and were a base for the struggle for democracy.

My degree in Romance Philology did not prepare me enough for the new approaches to teachers’ language education that were emerging. Nobody had taken on the challenges posed by a society with two languages, the uniqueness of the social and cognitive aspects of bilingualism, or the apparent state of diglossia of the Catalan language in regards to Spanish. As a teacher of Spanish, the need to analyze and gain knowledge about how these languages should be treated at university (and mainly in primary and secondary teacher education) led to my interest in sociolinguistics.

In 1975, I applied for a Fulbright scholarship to specialize in an area that was not recognized in our university programs at the time. For reasons which I was not entirely conscious of at the time, I chose the study of interactional sociolinguistics, an approach which was not considered in the emerging Catalan sociolinguistics of the time, which was oriented towards the sociology of language, with Ferguson and Fishman as fundamental references [1].

Obtaining the grant allowed me to spend a year at the University of California, Berkeley. It was a wonderful time of discovery and study. It was an academic dream. After three years of almost frantic dedication to debunking traditional notions of language teaching, I wished to expand my horizons in order to find answers to the questions that I was asking myself.

I knew of John Gumperz through Xavier Rubert de Ventós, who had spent some time at Berkeley. He was the one who told me about the existence of a group of sociolinguists that might interest me, because of their ties to the study of cultures and interaction. In fact, the relationship between languages and cultures was being studied in the Department of Anthropology, at Kroeber Hall, in Berkeley.
John J. Gumperz was my tutor, back when he was working in the Language Behavior Research Laboratory. I still remember my arrival at Berkeley, and the climb uphill, where the laboratory was located in a former private residence, all made of wood, with stained glass windows, all very British-like. Talking with Gumperz, I learned that as a visiting scholar I had access to offices and classrooms, that I could join in with the group of professors and graduate students, that I had all kinds of resources at my fingertips.

An academic dream? More than one.

A dream: open libraries; neat aisles of books organized by subject, within reach. This had an exciting effect on someone like me who associated libraries with closed, uninspiring spaces, where knowledge was confined and could not be accessed unless one knew the secret code.

Another dream: a postgraduate education system, or so-called graduate studies, led by professors in continual contact with students, with many informal meetings, from parties to lunch talks. A bibliographic world within reach and professors who were near at hand, names I had only been able to worship from the other side of the Atlantic, at my forgotten and precarious university.

And the biggest dream of all: attending Syntax classes taught by George Lakoff, Semantics classes with Charles Fillmore, and Ethnography of Communication classes with John Gumperz, where we spoke about codeswitching in communities and among groups of people; being able to share, during the hour lunch break, conversations with a mix of professors and students, discussing issues in an interdisciplinary way [2]. Everything exuded spontaneity and informality, very far from the relationships with professors that I was used to from my years as a university student.

At the end of that academic year, the Linguistic Institute of America organized its summer school in Hawaii about sociolinguistics, and there, with the support of Gumperz and his department, I was able to attend the classes given by Labov, Fishman, and others.

I learned so much in a short time, reading research papers, engaging in dialogue with professors in courses and lectures, and having personal consultations with professors and students about topics I was interested in.

And above all, I benefited from the guidance of John Gumperz, without any trace of what we would today refer to as academic competitiveness, and with the dedication that was usual in him. Under his guidance, I started to train in fieldwork at a school in Oakland with a high number of African-American students. There, I started doing interviews and recording conversations, confronting the complexities of participant observation and the transcription of conversational units.

Now we can interpret what was happening there: it was the beginning of an approach to knowledge about language use that took into account action and interaction between people, within the framework of the contact between different cultures. So orality, new pragmatic studies, ethnography and ethnomethodology, were emerging as fields that did not need to rely on the parameters for the study of written language. New models to explain language use needed nurturing, emerging from the seminal...
work of Harvey Sacks on the systematic description of conversation. Sacks had died in an accident a couple of years earlier.

The case of John J. Gumperz is a clear example of the changes taking place in the study of language use. In the 60s, along with Dell H. Hymes, he edited a special issue of the American Anthropologist [3] journal that would be the basis for the ethnography of communication, a discipline that aims to explore human communities by observing their communication patterns. This approach proposed the study of the verbal uses of speech communities – understood as groups of people who share norms of communicative behavior, using one or more languages and their varieties, i.e., their communicative repertoire – with the aim of discovering what is meant by communicative competence in each community. The latter is a key concept, as we know, and one that has been of paramount importance in various fields, especially in education, and in the teaching and learning of languages. Using this notion, Hymes and Gumperz responded to the Chomskian concept of linguistic competence and expanded it:

“What a speaker needs to know to communicate effectively in culturally significant settings. Like Chomsky’s term on which it is patterned, communicative competence refers to the ability to perform. An attempt is made to distinguish between what a speaker knows – what his inherent capacities are and how he behaves in particular instances. However whereas students of linguistic competence seek to explain those aspects of grammar believed to be common to all humans independent of social determinants, students of communicative competence deal with speakers as members of communities, as incumbents of social roles, and seek to explain their use of language to achieve self-identification and to conduct their activities.” (Gumperz & Hymes, 1972: vii) [4]

Dell H. Hymes, meanwhile, proposed the SPEAKING model with eight components (Situation, Participants, Ends, Act Sequences, Key, Instruments, Norms, Genre) allowing the description and analysis of communicative events [5].

Years later, John J. Gumperz founded interactional sociolinguistics and suggested the notions of contextualisation conventions, indices and cues, which have been and are very relevant to the study of intercultural relations and speech in general:

“Communicative competence can be defined in interactional terms as ‘the knowledge of linguistic and related communicative conventions that speakers must have in order to create and sustain conversational cooperation’, and thus involves both grammar and contextualization. While the ability to produce grammatical sentences is common to all who count as speakers of a language or dialect, knowledge of contextualization conventions varies along different dimensions.” (Gumperz 1982: 209) [6]

In the city of Barcelona at the time, then there were evident inequalities in the social use of Spanish and Catalan. Moreover, a considerable population from various migration waves had joined the working life of urban centers and villages. These newcomers were Spanish-speaking, mostly of southern Penninsular varieties. Paradoxically, the only official language at the time (Spanish) was the one used habitually by both lower social classes, and by the administration and authorities,
while the middle and upper classes would regularly use either language (Catalan or Spanish) or both.

On returning from my stay in the United States, together with Amparo Tuson, we decided to embark on a qualitative empirical study on language use among young people, at a time of crisis and change, of transition from dictatorship to democracy. We designed a basic ethnographic study to investigate the interactions of people in a traditional Catalan neighborhood of Barcelona (Sant Andreu de Palomar), in which an immigrant population had settled, so both languages, Catalan and Spanish, were used there.

The teachings and orientations of Gumperz were present throughout the development of the research. Badia i Margarit, our tutor in the Department of Catalan Philology at the Universitat de Barcelona, agreed to us co-authoring what would be our minor thesis, given the laborious nature of our ethnographic approach: fieldwork, recordings, transcriptions and analysis of oral use in everyday interactions among young people. Beyond surveys on language use, we wanted to know what young people actually did when they used language.

Amparo Tuson

As a result of our first research project – which was really the first piece of research about language use and codeswitching in Catalonia from an ethnographic and interactional sociolinguistic perspective – we published an article in *Cuaderons de Pedagogia* [7], where we presented Hymes' SPEAKING model and the concept of communicative competence. Subsequently, a detailed summary of the dissertation was published, first in Catalan in the journal *Treballs de Sociolingüística Catalana* and later in English in the *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* [8].

Clearly, the micro perspective, which the approach that we had chosen for our research offered, was innovative and productive for describing and analyzing the situation of languages in Catalonia from the perspective of how language users mobilised the two languages, Catalan and Spanish, available to them. Such description and analysis was very necessary and it was based on natural data collected in real communicative situations.

The experience of fieldwork in an urban environment, yielding spontaneous oral data for analysis using a systematic framework, convinced me that I had to continue along this line of research, to refine the tools and methods of ethnography communication and to develop the emerging proposals of conversation analysis. Suffice to say that, as colleagues, we both shared great enthusiasm for this endeavour, and we became close collaborators both in our teaching and research. The door had been opened for me to continue my graduate training in the productive Californian context, where the transformation of the language sciences was emerging.

I was granted a Fulbright scholarship, which allowed me to enroll in the Department of Anthropology at Berkeley to start a master's degree in 1981, followed by a Ph.D. I encountered the postgraduate environment that Helena Calsamiglia had spoken to me about: both the informal encounters (the famous Friday *In vino veritas*, regular research presentations, the publication of working papers) and the close relationships with researchers from other disciplines. My lengthy stay (1981-1985, with intermittent leave to fulfil my lecturing obligations at the UAB) allowed me to
study and perform research, surrounded by veterans and young scholars, from a new perspective in which the application of ethnography, conversation analysis and the study of codeswitching in interaction were already well-known and and becoming consolidated [9].

It should be noted that both Helena Calsamiglia, in 1977, and both of us, a few years later, observed the interest that the sociolinguistic situation in Catalonia aroused. In different contexts – seminars, conferences and classes – we were asked to explain the relationship between Catalan and Spanish, public and private language uses, the historical and social realities and the policies that prohibited or regulated the use of both languages. From our explanations, one could see that this was not a situation of ‘simple’ diglossia, given that the minority language – Catalan – was a language belonging both to lower classes and rural areas and to speakers in any social stratum; a language that also had an extensive and significant literary tradition, which had been limited from public use by the repression of the Franco dictatorship. Proof of this interest was the invitation received from Stanford University to give a seminar on the sociolinguistic situation in Catalonia. This seminar was attended, among others, by Charles Ferguson and Joshua Fishman, conspicuous representatives of the sociology of language, the macro perspective which was most popular in Catalonia at the time.

The relationship with John Gumperz, as my tutor, was always marked by his innovative and critical intelligence, manifested in his comments on the analysis I was doing, his generosity and care. His office, full of books and recorded tapes, was always open and available to us. He formed a team of young PhD students and made us prepare presentations for seminars in which all members of the group discussed the contributions, and then he encouraged us to present them at conferences or seminars, and on panels that he would sometimes coordinate.

Finally, in 1985 I was able to conduct a research stay in summer and autumn, to finish and defend my thesis [10]. During this final period, I taught Spanish classes for undergraduate students, an enormously valuable experience for my training.

Learning about ethnographic research and interactional sociolinguistics, which had begun with our minor dissertation thesis – fieldwork, participant observation, recordings, transcripts, interviews, detailed description and analysis of data – at the hands of Gumperz and the other professors at Berkeley, allowed me to produce a thesis focused on a primary school class in a school network known as Escola Catalana. The network was a cooperative of parents committed to innovative education, within the educational reform movement in Catalonia, which practiced a linguistic immersion approach, the seed of later educational policy in Catalonia. My study focused on observing the use of Catalan and Spanish, mainly in the classroom, based on recordings and my fieldnotes. In fact, it was the first ethnographic study on language use and codeswitching conducted in a school in Catalonia.

John J. Gumperz showed me, through his attitude, his professional comments, his academic and personal advice, through detailed data analysis to discover possible solutions to problems or questions posed my the research, through his respect, his way of carefully listening, through his reading of my writing, which he returned with wise comments, that thesis direction was about accompaniment. He did all this for me, and I believe for anyone who was lucky enough to study with him. He was a living example of a true Master (with a capital M).
II. Period of consolidation: development of discourse studies at Catalan universities

Helena Calsamiglia and Amparo Tuson

With our early research, we noted the importance of the ethnographic procedures (e.g. participant observation, collection of natural data in real communicative situations) to understand how people construct their individual and social identities through interaction with other people, as well as how 'context' is produced, created, recreated and changed in interactions, through the negotiation of the meaning of actions by participants. Comparing interviews and recordings, we could see the differences between what people say they do and when they speak and what they really do when speaking. Our data confirmed John Gumperz's affirmation that speakers with more than one language at their disposal use them as a communicative resource, in the same way that monolinguals can use dialects or registers of language. So, in this perspective, far from seeing bilingualism (or plurilingualism) as a problem for communication, it is seen as an asset, as one more resource that speakers use to meet their communicative objectives, to create context and to present themselves and build their identities, while also interpreting the aims and identities of others.

The relationship with Gumperz continued beyond the period of our initial investigations, which were the epicenter of our stays in California. Since then, the impact of his qualitative approach to the study of language use clearly influenced our teaching and our research. We introduced the perspectives of the ethnography of communication, sociolinguistics, conversation analysis and pragmatics in the initial and ongoing development of teachers, and in undergraduate and graduate studies in the Faculty of Education and Faculty of Arts at the UAB.

The establishment of democracy in our country meant a clear modernization of universities. The stability of staff and official support procured a substantial improvement in education and research structures. Our active participation with peers with the same concerns led to the foundation of the Grup d'Estudis de Pragmàtica (GREP), which later became the Cercle d'Anàlisi del Discurs (CAD/1991), which was based at the UAB but with an interuniversity vocation, with members from different institutions.

Meanwhile, our visits with John Gumperz would now change direction. He was invited to the II Congrés Internacional de Llengua Catalana (1986) in the section on the sociology of language. Around the same time, Gumperz was elected as the first president of the newly founded International Pragmatics Association (IPrA) [11]. During his tenure, he supported the holding of the 3rd IPrA conference at the Universitat de Barcelona, which was organised by Grup interuniversitari d'Estudis de Pragmàtica. We jointly coordinated the team that organized this event. The conference was attended by 700 people and contributed to strengthening the presence of research that would come under the umbrella of Discourse Analysis, as well as showcasing advances in textual linguistics and other disciplines in the language sciences.

In 1990, John J. Gumperz also formed part of the panel that examined Helena Calsamiglia's Ph.D. thesis, defended in the Department of Spanish Philology at UAB,
under the supervision of José Manuel Blecua. In her research, the Ph.D. candidate delved into the study of written discourse – through narratives and text linguistics – applied to the development discourse skills by adolescents at school.

Since then, various research projects were undertaken at Universitat de Barcelona, the Universitat de Lleida and the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, with the gradual establishment of research groups in the various aspects of Discourse Analysis.

Before Gumperz finalized his research career at Berkeley, Amparo Tuson returned to that university in 1991 as a Research Associate, where she had the opportunity to take part in the last seminar taught by Gumperz before his retirement (officially, as he continued to work for a long time). During her stay, she also wrote Anàlisi de la conversa [12], enjoying John Gumperz’s comments and excellent criteria at every opportunity [13].

Later, Helena Calsamiglia moved to the new Universitat Pompeu Fabra in Barcelona, with the opportunity to extend her research and undergraduate and graduate teaching in the fields of translation, communication and journalism. Soon, research groups active in various Catalan universities became part of the Xarxa d’Estudis del Discurs, which she coordinated. The activities of this network went on for several years, including conferences and meetings, with the participation of local and international researchers.

At this point it should be noted that one of the first activities of the Xarxa d’Estudis del Discurs was designed to pay tribute to John Gumperz, after two decades of intellectual and academic relationships. We wanted to express our gratitude for his enormous work to advance studies on language use.

In 1997 the Coverses amb John J. Gumperz, presented on this website, took place in Barcelona, at the UPF building in La Rambla [14]. For two days we had the opportunity to discuss his academic trajectory – from dialectology to interactional sociolinguistics –, his broad and critical perspective on mainstream studies of language uses, and to deepen our understandings of the main theoretical and methodological problems and challenges raised throughout the twentieth century regarding research on contextualized language use. In the Converses, John J. Gumperz speaks about his beginnings in the study of language variation from a classic dialectological approach, and how he soon realized that he needed the notion of context and the observation of use in interaction to understand how varieties worked. He also speaks of his ethnographic approach, of participant observation, of living among the people whose language use one studies, in order to reliably capture their uses and social values, their communicative intentions and their interpretations. He also speaks of ethnemethodology, variational sociolinguistics, symbolic interaction, and conversation analysis, among other traditions. Very importantly, he mentions the need for detailed analysis of interactions to discover contextualisation cues, to understand how people construct the sense of what they do in talk-in-interaction, and the importance of relating these detailed analyses to social theory (incorporating, for example, contributions from Foucault and Bourdieu), in order to provide critical insight for social change.

We encourage you, therefore, to listen to (and feel!) or read the words of John J. Gumperz presented in this introduction. For us it is a great pleasure to make them
available to all those interested in understanding the development of an important part of the language sciences through the voice of one of the main protagonists, who for us was a teacher and respected colleague [15].

Selected bibliography by John J. Gumperz
(on the themes discussed in the Converses)

(1958) “Dialect Differences and Social Stratification in a North Indian Village” American Anthropologist 60:668-681
(1964)The Ethnography of Communication (with Dell Hymes, eds.). American Anthropologist 66:6, part 2 (Special Issue).

Notes

[1] It was especially outside the university where thinking and research about the sociolinguistic situation of our environment was emerging. Following a seminar held at the Ateneu Barcelonès, Lluís Vicent Aracil pushed me to study sociolinguistics in the United States. It was then when I read the essay by Francis Vallverdú, Dues llengües, dues funcions, among other texts around at the time.

[2] I name just some of the professors: Susan Ervin-Tripp, John Searle, Robin Lakoff, Wallace Chafe, Jenny Cook-Gumperz, and some of the advanced students: Susan Gal, Deborah Tannen, Kit Woolard (who, years later, would become a relevant researcher of language use in Catalonia, from a Gumperzian approach).


[9] I coincided – under John J. Gumperz’s supervision – with Jaquie Ural, Monica Heller and Kit Woolard, who were studying language contact in the Basque Country, Canada and Catalonia, respectively.

[13] Just before the visit to Berkeley, an article had been published that discussed the promise of interactional sociolinguistics for language education:
This text is also available online by consulting volume 2 of the journal SIGNOS in the section Hemeroteca de Quaderns digitals (http://www.quadernsdigitals.net).
[14] We are thankful for the support of the Dean’s Office in the Faculty of Translation and Interpreting at the UPF, and especially to the Dean Dr. Paz Battaner.
[15] We want to thank the GREIP research group who welcomed the idea of publishing this material. Its current coordinator, Melinda Dooly, facilitated the means to do so. We especially want to acknowledge the careful and enthusiastic work of Marta Juanhuix, Júlia Llompart and Emilee Moore in preparing this online publication. We also thank Luci Nussbaum for her intelligent review of this introduction.