

# Intersubjectivity

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## Introduction

Approaches to intersubjectivity have been developed across disciplines such as philosophy, psychology, linguistics, and sociology. Recent debates in linguistic anthropology have been shaped, in part, by problems that were inherited as intersubjectivity entered the conceptual landscape of the field, and in part, by problems generated within the field as the concept was applied across ethnographic contexts. In this entry, key approaches to intersubjectivity are discussed in relation to the problems they address, including the problems of order, indeterminacy, existence, and exposure. The problem of order can be summarized as follows: if we are acting in our own self-interest, what motivation do we have to cooperate with others in creating a coherent social order? Theories of intersubjectivity that address this problem tend to focus on cooperative mechanisms that make the achievement of mutual understanding possible. The problem of indeterminacy asks: How is it possible to decode utterances, given their inherent incompleteness? In addressing this question, intricate relations between language and intersubjectivity emerge, bringing to light the many grammatical systems that target intersubjective coordination on the one hand, and the forms of knowledge and practice that make those systems viable, on the other. The problem of existence asks: How do individuals transcend their own physical and psychological perspectives to exist in the same objective world as others? Here, intersubjectivity is understood first and foremost as the universal condition for interaction and communication, rather than an outcome of either. Last is the problem of exposure, which asks: Is the aim of achieving intersubjective understanding advisable, given the harm others are likely to do to you? Here, intersubjective understanding appears as a false promise which exposes the subject to harmful actions, affects, and intentions. Carried along by the hope of transparent access to the thoughts and feelings of others, the subject finds herself trapped in her own projections, where self and other, subject and object, are confused and conflated, and mutual understanding is deferred indefinitely.

## The problem of order

Harold Garfinkel and Erving Goffman foregrounded intersubjectivity as they laid the groundwork for conversation analysis (CA) and related approaches to the analysis of social interaction (Goodwin and Heritage 1990). Approaches to intersubjectivity that emerged out of this tradition were responding to the problem of order, which itself arose out of utilitarian theories of social action (Heritage 1984, 7–36). In its most basic

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formulation, the problem can be summarized as follows: if everyone is acting in their own self-interest, what motivation do they have to cooperate with others to create a coherent social order? Garfinkel inherited this problem from Talcott Parsons, who drew on thinkers like Émile Durkheim and Sigmund Freud to argue against utilitarian thinking by combining theories of society with theories of personality. Parsons argued that within a particular institution or social routine, actors cooperate with each other for three reasons: an action has been internalized by all involved as the appropriate one; the actors feel personal pressure to “live up to” these standards or risk damaging their self-esteem; and they fear reprisals for not acting appropriately, such as punishment or withdrawal of love or approval (Heritage 1984, 17).

Garfinkel argued that this reasoning drew Parsons away from the social actor’s perspective, thereby reducing the subjectivity of the actor to an effect of external, motivating factors. Departing from Parsons, Garfinkel focused his attention on the rational, intersubjective, and reflexive dimensions of situated social action. In doing so, he turned to phenomenology, and in particular, Alfred Schutz, who was interested in the order that emerges among ordinary people in mundane situations (Heritage 1984, 37–74). In a neighboring vein, Goffman was concerned with how people create and orient to the *appearance* of order in ordinary interactions. However, Garfinkel resisted the tendency in Schutz to focus on “types” and the tendency in Goffman to assign “motives” to participants, since working at that level of abstraction, it becomes very easy for the analyst to substitute their own perspective for that of the participants (Rawls 2002, 13).

For Garfinkel it follows from this that a sign is meaningless (not simply indeterminate), “except insofar as its position in some ordered sequence of interaction establishes an understanding between the participants” (Rawls 2006, 7). Garfinkel thought that any approach that did not fix attention on the sequential aspect of interaction would yield a vision of the social order that was nothing more than a “conceptual fiction laid over an underlying mess” (Rawls 2006, 11). In other words, an analysis of the sequential structure of interaction *is* an analysis of the social order. Language, just like all other domains of social activity, carries meaning only as it is subsumed by that order. Since Garfinkel, types and processes of typification have made their way back into theories of intersubjectivity and language has been reconstituted as an autonomous but related object. As part of this, intersubjective coordination of stance has come into view, and there has been greater emphasis on the structures and capacities that underlie mutual understanding as a possible basis for distinguishing humans from other animals.

The most explicit formulation of intersubjectivity in this tradition can be found in Jack Sidnell’s “Architecture of Intersubjectivity Revisited.” Sidnell presents intersubjectivity as a layered construct modeled on the ontogenetic development of humans. Each layer corresponds to a behavior, and underneath the layers is an architecture that makes those behaviors possible. While specific behaviors vary across groups, the architecture itself is taken to be universal. The behaviors include contact and mutual engagement, for example maintaining eye contact with another person; joint attention and shared intentionality, as when two people focus their attention on something while also attending to one another; coordinated stances, where one person highlights some aspect of the thing being shown or shows it in a particular respect or capacity;

inhabiting a shared world; recognizing social and institutional facts; and finally, achieving action and mutual understanding (Sidnell 2014, 365–373).

According to Sidnell, the architecture that supports the ultimate achievement of action and mutual understanding includes *action sequencing*, a *repair system*, and *human language* (2014, 373–391). Action sequencing generates a normative structure of positions, which are organized relative to some starting point earlier in the sequence, for example, the answer in a question–answer pair. People are held accountable in relation to these normative structures, so if there is a slot for an answer in a question–answer pair, but a participant produces no answer, they are expected to give a reason. This is part of the architecture of human intersubjectivity, which other apes, according to Sidnell, do not display (2014, 390). Intersubjectivity is also supported by a system of repair, or “a self-righting mechanism usable wherever troubles of speaking, hearing, and understanding are encountered” (Sidnell 2015, 178). Sidnell argues that if repair were not a pervasive resource for speakers, language would have to be structured differently than it is, since achieving mutual understanding would be difficult (2015, 180).

## The problem of indeterminacy

The problem of indeterminacy begins not with social action or the social order, but with language, understood as a decontextualized, formal system. Arguing against decontextualized visions of language, which were dominant at the time, Rommetveit proposes a conceptual framework that treats language as “thoroughly and genuinely social” (Rommetveit 1976, 201). He argues that “*what is made known* in an act of verbal communication can ... be properly assessed only if we venture to explore the architecture of intersubjectivity within which it is embedded” (Rommetveit 1976, 202). To illustrate, he offers the following utterance:

I too was invited, I went to the ball ... And it rolled and rolled away ...

This utterance, he says, is a “message potential.” In order for its potential to be realized, the listener must “adopt the attitude” of the speaker, thereby accepting their “premises” for intersubjectivity (Rommetveit 1976, 205). Tacit acceptance of these premises means that a “meta-contract” has been endorsed by the participants, and the meaning of the utterance has been locked down. First, Rommetveit asks us to imagine that the speaker is a schizophrenic. After uttering “*the ball ...*” the schizophrenic seems to stumble in a way. His act of speech is disrupted, his story does not continue in accordance with what he initially intended to make known. He pauses apparently bewildered by what he himself has just uttered” (Rommetveit 1976, 203). Next, we are asked to imagine that the same utterance has been “transplanted” into a poetry reading. The “bewilderment,” Rommetveit says, would cease to exist. People might say that they aren’t sure what it means, or they might “express a feeling of having grasped its meaning intuitively and emotionally, without being able to put it into words” (Rommetveit 1976, 205). Rommetveit points out that these kinds of transplants are pervasive in language use and their existence proves that “we can adopt the attitude of very different Others.” The speaker also engages in a process like this, which

Rommetveit calls “anticipatory decoding.” Together, speaker and hearer work toward convergent understandings.

The problem illustrated by the juxtaposition of examples above is the problem of indeterminacy. Utterance instantiations are not messages, but mere message potentials. They accrue specific meanings when speaker and hearer converge on a frame and each has taken the attitude of the other. The utterance is further situated with respect to the positions occupied by speaker and hearer relative to temporal, spatial, and social coordinates. These coordinates are linked to language via the deictic, or grammatical pointing system (Rommetveit 1976, 202). From the zero-point, or the “origo,” first-person and second-person pronouns, i.e. *I* and *You* “constitute the two poles of potential states of intersubjectivity” (Rommetveit 1976, 202). From there, there are two realms of potential available for building intersubjective states: indeterminate utterances, indexically linked to the intersubjective world; and the shared or assumed knowledge that constitutes the world (Rommetveit 1976, 202–204). In Rommetveit’s terms *what is made known* draws both on *what is said* and *what is taken for granted*. These two realms of potential – language and shared knowledge – are complemented by two realms of actuality: “rules of attribution” and “meta-contracts.” Rules of attribution are normative attunements to the attitude of the Other, which are given by “meta-contracts,” or “shared frame[s] of reference” (Rommetveit 1976, 211). For example, it is appropriate to be attuned to the poetic attitude of the Other at a poetry reading, and to interpret message potentials and shared knowledge in that light.

Many of the elements that comprise this notion of intersubjectivity are also found in those that address the problem of order. However, for Rommetveit, the problem driving inquiry is not how the social order is brought about and maintained in interaction, but rather, how it is possible to decode utterances, given their inherent incompleteness. Given this concern, he accords language a more central role. Language is ground-zero for intersubjectivity. It creates relational positions, situated in time and space, for the *I* and the *You* to step into. From those positions, the language user has at their disposal a stock of indeterminate utterances, which, due to their incompleteness, act like prompts to attend to the shared world in particular ways (see also Hanks 1996, 147–149). Without intersubjectivity, we would not be able to decode utterances and without the indexical function of language we would lose a vital resource for directing attention to a shared world under a particular perspective.

This view is taken further by Émile Benveniste, who argues that the pronominal system of language, and more specifically, the *I–you* contrast, is the foundation of intersubjectivity (1971, 224–225). These categories lend permanence to the experience of being a subject. Unlike a concept such as “tree,” which all instances of “tree” refer back to, pronouns contain nothing of the individual people designated by them. Rather, they refer to the discursive moment in which they are uttered. There, they offer themselves as empty forms to be appropriated by anyone in that moment who is speaking or being spoken to. They thereby lend a quality of permanence to subjectivity by linking instantiations of *I* to a stable, pronominal contrast in language.

Jakobson’s multifunctionalism pushes further in this direction, highlighting the linguistic dimensions of phenomena central to Rommetveit’s Architecture of Intersubjectivity. For example, where Rommetveit focuses on the realization of

message-potentials, Jakobson identifies different types of messages (each with their own potential for realization). Where Rommetveit focuses on our ability to adopt the attitude of another speaker, Jakobson focuses on our ability to report the speech of another speaker (and in doing so, partially adopt their perspective). Where Rommetveit focuses on shared knowledge that makes reference possible, Jakobson focuses on the referential function of language. It is as if, for each “function” of intersubjectivity, language has a function to match. Hence, Benveniste’s observation that “[l]anguage is marked so deeply by the expression of subjectivity that one might ask if it could still function and be called language if it were constructed otherwise” (1971, 225).

Since these foundational works, linguistic anthropologists have gone on to identify additional grammatical resources that target “intersubjective coordination” (Evans, Bergqvist, and San Roque 2018). There is also increasing interest in the role of embodied communication for establishing and maintaining intersubjective relations. For example, studying communication between hearing and deaf Nepalis, Green argues that what is made known relies not only on conventional associations in language and gesture, but also on meanings immanent in bodily dispositions shared across a group of socially and historically situated actors (Green 2014, 90–91). For example, in a place where people regularly make grain alcohol by hand, producing the movements associated with that activity can convey what it does because of shared bodily routines.

A related approach that presupposes an intimate and reciprocal dependence between language and intersubjectivity is that put forth by Hanks (2013). Like Rommetveit, Hanks organizes elements of intersubjectivity by way of successive embeddings of meaning – from the field of co-presence and the deictic system it articulates with, to more complex phenomena. However, where Rommetveit goes to message structure, Hanks goes to Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of the “social field,” and the historical processes through which actual actors come to inhabit the positions it supplies. The social field is a historically given, asymmetrical space of struggle and competition. According to Hanks, speaking is one way people take up positions in the social field. Over time, the positions one occupies give rise to embodied dispositions. Those dispositions enable some position-takings and makes others inaccessible. This tends to compound social inequalities by preparing those habituated to positions of power and authority to speak in ways that legitimate their position, while those who have not been habituated to positions of power are unable to do so (Hanks 1996, 73). Intersubjective relations, for Hanks, are constrained by these asymmetries. Further constraints derive from the modes of access available to speaker and hearer in the deictic field as well as the conventional categories and relations given by the semantic field of the language.

In the social field, shared understanding is not a likely outcome of co-engagement. Precisely the opposite: embedding in the social field has a tendency to make intelligibility and accountability unidirectional phenomena. There is a built-in dis-preference for reciprocal, shared understandings. History and asymmetry are emphasized over and against universality and cohesion and the problem of social reproduction emerges as the upside-down problem of order. We are no longer asking how self-interested individuals find motivation to cooperate with others to create a coherent social order. Instead, we are asking how social asymmetries are perpetuated, despite attempts on the part of individuals to intervene.

## The problem of existence

Drawing on the work of phenomenologist Edmund Husserl, Duranti proposes a theory of intersubjectivity which, like the one developed by Hanks, does not foreground the achievement of mutual understanding in actual instances of interaction. Instead, he is interested in the problem of existence in a shared, objective reality. The problem can be summarized as follows: if each individual perspective is shaped by the experiences and perceptions of that individual, how is it that we exist in the same objective world as others? (Duranti 2010, 21–22). For example, if I am standing on one side of a table and you are on the other, I have no direct evidence that the side of the table that is invisible to me is there. However, I assume that we are both seeing the same table, which is part of the one, objective world we are in together (Duranti 2010, 22–23). Reality, then, relies on intersubjectivity, which itself, relies on reciprocal empathy, or the possibility of “trading places.”

Intersubjectivity in this view is “an existential condition that can *lead* to a shared understanding ... rather than being itself such an understanding” (Duranti 2010, 21–22). It follows from this that the Other need not be currently present for reciprocal empathy to occur, since it is possible to trade places with those who have “touched, modified, exploited, or enjoyed” the natural or cultural world before you came across it (Duranti 2010, 26). Here, co-presence is replaced by contiguity in a more general sense and displacements in time, space, and awareness become possible. An animal who sees tracks in the snow also experiences intersubjectivity in this way, however, human intersubjectivity goes one step further. In addition to our capacity for reciprocal empathy, we have the ability to step outside of the ordinary flow of activity to objectify and thematize aspects of our experience, thereby enabling us to apprehend beings as types of beings (e.g. “students,” “teachers,” or “audience members”) and to attend together to particular tasks or activities, understood as such (Duranti 2010, 27). We therefore move through the world with expectations about what we will find, and the ability to recognize things as instances of things we remember.

While corresponding ideas can be found in responses to the problems of order and indeterminacy, there are significant differences. First, as Duranti himself emphasizes, intersubjectivity is not the outcome of communication or interaction, but the universal condition of possibility for both. Second, co-presence is demoted and intersubjectivity appears diffuse, encompassing more of the natural and cultural world within which interactions unfold. Third, language use does not play a role in intersubjectivity per se, since it is not necessary for reciprocal empathy to occur. We can just as easily experience reciprocal empathy when we are exposed to the bodies of others “moving and acting in ways that we recognize as similar to the ways in which we would act under similar circumstances” and these experiences need not include language (Duranti 2010, 22). Language does offer special resources for objectifying and thematizing our experience, but this activity is a small part of what Duranti’s conception of intersubjectivity makes possible.

## The problem of exposure

In addressing the problem of order, Parsons proposed a theory of personality, which was attenuated (if not erased) as linguistic anthropology shifted focus from psychological and sociological determinates to publically visible social conduct. Parsons's early theory of personality assumes a social actor who has internalized standards of conduct, is emotionally needy, and has fragile self-esteem. Therefore, he feels that he is under pressure to live up to those standards, and willingly submits to the social order (Heritage 1984, 17). There is a growing body of richly ethnographic work in linguistic anthropology which argues instead that it is not always clear what our interlocutors are aiming for and that hazarding a guess may not be advisable for social, psychological, political, philosophical, or moral reasons (see Robbins and Rumsey 2008).

In this vein Groark argues that, more often than not, intersubjective relations fail to enable affection and affirmation, and instead are experienced as exposing the subject to the potentially harmful actions, affects, and intentions of others. This is the problem of exposure. Here, subjects are no longer Parsons's needy interactants suffering from deficient self-esteem. Instead, driven by fantasies of mutual recognition, they long for others, experienced intersubjectively as "autonomous centers of feeling, need, action, and desire" (Groark 2013, 279). And yet, they rarely achieve this because "relational forms that, while appearing to provide transparent access to the thoughts and feelings of others, are in fact dominated by complex projective processes in which self and other, inner and outer, subjective and objective are systematically conflated" (Groark 2013, 279–280).

In this view, we have very little knowledge of what people actually think or what they are trying to do and that absence of input makes us anxious. We are anxious about the fact that people can deceive us, shame us, disparage us, and judge us untrustworthy, among other things. Intersubjectivity, then, is not the actual achievement of shared understanding worked out in interaction; it is not that which contextualizes indeterminate utterances; and it is not the source of objectivity. Rather, it is a fantasy. From this perspective, the achievement of shared understanding seems like a façade or a false promise, the meta-contracts that lock down meanings of indeterminate utterances appear untrustworthy, and objective reality is destabilized by projective processes that make empathic attunement feel dangerous, inadvisable, or morally questionable.

SEE ALSO: Attention (and Joint Attention); Benveniste, Émile; Bourdieu, Pierre; Chomsky, and the Chomskyan Tradition vs. Linguistic Anthropology; Common Ground; Context and Contextualization; Deixis and Indexicals; Durkheim, Émile; Goffman, Erving; Jakobson, Roman; Language and Space; Performativity vs. Indexicality; Phatic, the: Communication and Communion; Silverstein, Michael

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