1   Rethinking anti-intentionalism

1.0   Introduction

In this book I revisit the anthropological critique of analytic philosophers' theories of meaning and action based on speakers' intentions. On the basis of the empirical investigation of oral communication, face-to-face interaction, and written texts, I argue that both anthropologists and analytic philosophers overstated their case and that the salience of intentions cannot be decided once and for all because it actually varies across cultural contexts. As we will see, in some cases speakers avoid any kind of discourse about intentions, focusing on the consequences of actions rather than on their alleged original goals. But in other cases, speculation about intentions is present even in societies where people have been said to avoid reading the mind of others. My goal is to support an ethnographic and interactional perspective on intentions as cognitive, emotional, and embodied dispositions always embedded in an intersubjective world of experience. To provide such a perspective, I review previous arguments made by linguistic anthropologists and return to some of the fundamental concepts and claims of speech act theory as elaborated by John Searle over the last half century. In addition to relying on the data from three research projects – one in Samoa and two in the US – I also draw from a number of theoretical perspectives, including Edmund Husserl's phenomenology, in which both intentionality and intersubjectivity play a key role. The transcripts and written texts I analyze in some detail in the chapters to follow will demonstrate that language – broadly defined – is a great resource for us to understand how particular speakers conceptualize, perform, and understand social action. Whether or not they believe or act as if intentions matter, by using language social agents inhabit a world of others that is constraining, empowering, and inevitable. It is our task as analysts of human endeavors to examine which linguistic expressions make a difference in defining actions and assigning responsibility. Sometimes our previously conceived analytical categories provide us with a useful framework to make sense of new information. Other times, the fit is not there. An anthropological perspective must honor the universal without forgetting the particular.

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This book is an attempt to apply such a principle of investigation to a complex set of issues and a challenging set of data.

1.1   Reopening a dialogue that never took off

Thirty years ago I wrote a working paper (Duranti 1984) in which I argued that the role of intentions in communication is overrated. Starting from a specific case I had documented during my first fieldwork experience in (then "Western") Samoa, I discussed a protracted interaction during a meeting of the village council (*fono*) in which speakers' intentions did not seem to be as important as they are portrayed to be in commonsense accounts of interpretation as well as in well-established definitions of meaning in analytic philosophy (see Chapter 2). The two slightly revised versions of the 1984 working paper that were later published (Duranti 1988, 1993b) contained assertions that were interpreted as strongly anti-intentionalist by a number of scholars (e.g., Bogen 1987; Goldman 1993; Nuyts 1993; and van Dijk, see Chapter 7 in this book). Although I still stand by some of the points I made in my original account of the Samoan case, in this book I return to the data collected in Samoa (some of which I present here for the first time) and supplement them with the data from other projects in the US to clarify my position and extend my argument in new directions. My goal is to review some of the main issues of a three-decades-old debate and reach for a perspective on intentions and reading other minds that relies on anthropological and phenomenological methods. This perspective reframes previously discussed issues within a culturally informed theory of intentionality that includes inter-subjectivity as a key dimension of human understanding and acting in the world. The simultaneous adoption of what we might call, respectively, a context-specific and a universalistic stance on intentionality, intersubjectivity, and agency might at first appear problematic or even contradictory. I hope that the chapters that follow will guide readers toward the opposite conclusion, namely, that it is possible to integrate cultural contextualism (a term that has less baggage than "cultural relativism") with the need for some general and generalizable notions, intentionality being one of them. The idea of an "intentional continuum," which I present in Chapter 11, is an attempt to provide such an integration by acknowledging that there are variations in levels and degrees of intentional awareness and engagement across any human individual and collective action.

One of the reasons for me to return to the anti-intentionalism I espoused in my earlier work is to save its more valuable aspects while redirecting its critical roots toward a positive contribution to the study of human agency (Duranti 2004) and intersubjectivity (Duranti 2010). I am aware of the fact that researchers interested in human development and human cognition are

suspicious of any critical stance toward individual intentions as the basis for interpreting and defining human action. This is because human beings are typically distinguished from other species for being *intentional* subjects. If there are issues regarding intentions in the literature on human cognition, they usually concern different types or levels of intentionality, as has been the case in the literature on primate behavior (e.g., Premack and Woodruff 1978; Cheney and Seyfarth 1990; Jacob 2010). In this literature, the basic assumption is that (a) intentions are what gives meaning to actions, utterances included, and (b) humans have more sophisticated kinds of intentions (e.g., intentions about other people's intentions) when compared to other species. The bulk of this book is a discussion and refinement of the first assumption. I will not have anything to say about the second assumption, which deals with the differentiation of levels of intentionality across species, even though some parts of this book might be relevant to those who are interested in establishing or even measuring degrees of intentionality in non-human species.

The chapters to follow show that overall my stance regarding speakers' intentions as used in the literature on speech acts remains critical or at best cautious. This is made particularly explicit in Chapters 2, 5, and 10. At the same time, I believe that a theory of human action that takes cultural contexts seriously cannot entail a complete rejection of intentionality as a human faculty. As I will discuss in some detail in Chapter 8, when we look at verbal interaction searching for whether speakers engage in the activity of reading the intentions of others, we find those signs even in communities, like Samoa, that, as discussed in Chapter 3, have been described – and in many contexts are – as reluctant to publicly engage in introspection. The issue, as always in the difficult domain of cross-cultural comparison, is to be able to capture subtle differences among the many similarities due to the common human brain and shared conditions of human adaptation. The additional challenge is one of methods. Sociocultural anthropologists like to alternate between observing and asking questions. Biological anthropologists and evolutionary psychologists like to design experiments. I like to *look and see* (Wittgenstein 1958: §66) in the sense that I like to record what people tell each other in all kinds of situations and then see how their language reveals their thoughts, stances, beliefs, feelings, and aspirations. This is a humbling method, which has taught me to be skeptical of sharp dichotomies, including the dichotomy between mind-readers and non-mind-readers or between those who seem focused on what a specific Other might have *intended* to do and those who act on typification ("any person in this kind of situation is likely to do, say, think, feel x"). The chapters to follow reveal a variety of stances, strategies, and local conceptualizations that might be difficult to summarize with a "yes" or "no" as to whether or not intentions matter for a theory of social action as meaningful

action. To evaluate the relevance or applicability of such a variety, within and across cultural contexts, we need to understand the origins of the objections that a number of anthropologists raised to the ways in which intentions were (and to some extent still are) being used in the literature on meaning and especially in speech act theory and related approaches to speech as action.

As we shall see, some of the differences between speech act theorists' and anthropologists' view of meaning have to do with the type of data that are used to make certain theoretical claims: imagination vs. ethnography, make-up examples vs. recorded verbal interactions, English speakers vs. speakers of another, typically non-Indo-European language. There are also differences in how one writes and argues. The philosopher John Searle likes and often succeeds at practicing a style of writing that values clarity. For him this translates into a preference for simplification over complexification and for a professed dislike of ambiguity. Most anthropologists, on the other hand, pride themselves on the ability to identify and represent complex, often ambiguous domains of human interaction and are suspicious of simplification, especially when dealing with non-western cultural traditions. If one adds the fact that Searle usually presents stereotypical examples of human behavior, while linguistic anthropologists tend to focus on the minute details of actual communicative exchanges, the challenge of establishing a dialogue is hard to overcome. In this book I try to counter what I see as a *consensual construction of incommensurability* by revisiting claims, reviewing arguments, and introducing some new characters in the story. With this overall goal in mind, I discuss specific cases where speakers' utterances may be interpreted by recipients in ways that are independent of speakers' intentions (see in particular Chapters 5 and 6). I also argue that certain properties of verbal communication constrain or guide speakers' messages – in form and content – by making it more (or less) difficult for speakers to express certain meanings and thus perform certain social acts (see Chapters 5 and 6).

One of the possible conclusions of the analyses presented in this book is that the reconstruction of a speaker's state of mind might not tell us what we need to know to understand the force of their words, that is, what a person's utterances *accomplish* in the social world (I am borrowing the concept of "force" from J. L. Austin 1962). Another conclusion is that speakers have contextually variable access to and authority over the illocutionary force of their own utterances. Thus, sometimes speakers seem to fully control what they mean or the direction of the ongoing interaction. Other times the audience feels or seems empowered to assign particular interpretations to what someone said or did without concern for what that person might have "meant" or "intended." In Chapters 5 and 6 I will argue that in some cases speakers are led toward either expressing or accepting certain meanings because of the particular type of communicative system or communicative devices to

which they have access (e.g., the genre or the lexical choices they are expected
to use to convey their opinion). More generally, the data presented in several
of the chapters of this book suggest that there are *cultural* preferences for
engaging in particular interpretations of speech acts.[1] I use "cultural" here to
cover both the (typically unconscious) *dispositions* acquired by individuals
over the course of socialization processes – what Bourdieu (1977, 1990) tried
to capture with the use of the term *habitus* – and the *means* (verbal or
otherwise) through which humans express to others and to themselves what
they are (or were) up to.

1.2   Self and other

Since the beginning of the anthropological discussion about intentions in
the 1980s, the terms of the debate have changed and so has the type of
evidence that scholars have used for supporting their claims. But the central
anthropological concern has remained the same, namely, the implications of
local theories of interpretation on any universal theory of mind or of linguistic
communication.

At first, linguistic anthropologists focused their criticism on analytic
philosophers' models of "speech acts" (e.g., promises), understood as basic
units of human conduct. Over time, however, both the theoretical concepts and
the range of ethnographic materials brought to bear on the debate expanded.
The analysis of particular speech acts (or lack thereof) in one community
(e.g., in the Philippines, Samoa, or Morocco) in relation to local notions of
self (or person) and social action has been extended to include the effects
of social change (e.g., cultural contact through colonization or missionization)
on individuals' and communities' adoption or transformation of new practices
(e.g., praying, confessing, translating and interpreting foreign texts).

The theoretical debate has also been widened by new models and methods
recently introduced in a number of fields, including evolutionary anthro-
pology, developmental psychology, and neuroscience. The evidence for sub-
conscious and language-independent understanding of others' actions or for
actions uncovered by recent research on mirror-neurons has, for example,
helped to broaden the spectrum of philosophical approaches potentially useful
for thinking about how humans make sense of each other's actions. From
an almost exclusive concern with countering the individually based view of
intentionality and truth-value proposed by analytic philosophers, a space has
been opened in anthropology and other social sciences – across observational
and experimental approaches – for thinking about intentions as embedded in
interactively established modes of thinking, feeling, and doing. It is not by
accident, then, that the notion of "shared intentionality" (or "we-intentions")
has acquired some popularity as a substitute for the older, less familiar, and

more nuanced notion of intersubjectivity. In returning to my own and others' earlier arguments about the use of intentions as explanatory devices for human behavior, I engage with Searle's notion of "collective intentionality" at both a theoretical and empirical level (see Chapter 10). I argue that even though his notion of "we-intentions" is an important step in the recognition of the intersubjective quality of human understanding, it ends up reifying distinctions that do not quite capture how people communicate with one another.

1.3   Ethnopragmatics

Some twenty years ago I used the word "ethnopragmatics" to promote a blending of ethnography and pragmatics for studying the ways in which language is both constituted by and constitutive of social interaction and the social order (Duranti 1993b, 1994). That approach was born out of my intellectual engagement with Samoan ways of speaking, an engagement that has continued over time in almost everything I have studied, including improvisation, as shown by my comparison of Samoan orators and American jazz musicians (Duranti 2008b). It should not be surprising, then, that there is plenty of Samoan ethnopragmatics in this book, whether I look at *matai* (chiefs and orators) arguing in a *fono* or I examine the Samoan translation of Bible stories. The Samoan examples are important for me among other reasons because I believe that there is no other way of doing anthropology than starting from the anthropology of a particular place and a particular group of people who cannot but speak to one another in particular ways, for which they are accountable practically, morally, and aesthetically (Duranti 2004). This belief can translate to different methods of data collection. In my case, over the last thirty-five years I have favored the audio or audio-visual recording of what people say to one another not just on one occasion but over some extended period of time.[2] This means that the Samoan as well as the English speakers who are quoted in this book are anything but anonymous characters, even when only initials of their names or pseudonyms are used. In most cases, they are people I knew personally or interacted with on a number of occasions, often for years or decades. It is the combination of these shared experiences with the recordings of spontaneous interactions across all kinds of situations that I use to make my claims. I certainly do not consider my method of inquiry the best or the only one that others, including my students, should adopt. At the same time, it is important to understand the differences among the methods currently available in the study of human interaction.

Psychologists, economists, and game theorists have their clever experiments to test their hypotheses. Philosophers have their argumentative styles filtered through an ancient hermeneutical tradition. Ethnographers have their very personal experience of participating in the flow of social life they are trying

to capture in their fieldnotes. As a linguistic anthropologist, I have combined participant-observation with the frequent use of recording devices that have produced hundreds of hours of sounds and images amenable to repeated listening and viewing. What was said on a particular occasion by a Samoan chief, a candidate for the US Congress, or a jazz musician continues to live in the (now digitized) original recordings and the (repeatedly revised) transcripts. By no means do I believe that such transcripts are "natural" objects that anyone can see and interpret in the same way. As I have explained elsewhere (Duranti 2006b), they are cultural artifacts and as such they are not easy to read for someone who is not initiated into the cultural tradition where transcripts are produced, exchanged, and appreciated. I am thus aware of the fact that the sometimes lengthy examples of spoken or written language found in the chapters to follow – especially when they include the Samoan text and one or two lines of the English glosses – are hard to read through. But I hope that they have a redeeming side, namely, the opportunity for patient readers to examine the type of evidence I collected and relied upon.

1.4   Themes, issues, and intellectual connections

Regardless of whether it is a revised version of a previously published paper or a new contribution to our understanding of intentions in human affairs, each chapter is here ordered to reflect the evolution of my engagement with ideas and data. Thus, for example, Chapter 4 is a new chapter on promising in Samoan that comes right after the extensively revised version of a paper that was written some thirty years earlier (Duranti 1984). The two are one after the other because Chapter 4 provides the type of evidence that I *should have* provided in 1984 but I could not, in part because linguistic anthropologists at the time were not yet engaged with the cultural implications of the translation work done by missionaries.

Chapter 6 is about speeches in a political campaign in the US and as such it connects with one of the main issues discussed in Chapter 3, namely, the limited amount of control that speakers in political arenas have on how others interpret their actions including their speech. Chapter 7 documents the moment in 2004 when, prompted by a question by discourse analyst Teun van Dijk, I decided to return to write about intentions after some years spent writing about the linguistic encoding of agency (Duranti 1994, 2004) and absorbing a phenomenological perspective on intentionality. This approach comes to the fore in the last part of the book where I introduce Husserl's work and build on some of his insights on meaning-making (Chapter 9) and intersubjectivity (Chapter 10).

Some of the chapters are dedicated to the issue of intentions in broad theoretical terms. The second chapter tries to recapture the original intellectual

climate that motivated my own earlier interest in speakers' intentions and presents the critical-historical background for the chapters to follow. It contains a brief introduction to Searle's model of intentionality because his approach was the main target of the anthropological critique of how analytic philosophers were studying language as action back in the 1980s. It also shows that the critique was a missed opportunity for both linguistic anthropologists and philosophers to have a real debate. Searle took twenty-four years to respond to Rosaldo's criticism; linguistic anthropologists, in turn, did little to empirically test Searle's view of how people talk and act – Levinson's (1983) reanalysis of speech acts as parts of conversational sequences (e.g., adjacency pairs) is an exception. Anthropologists also ignored Searle's (1990) proposal for collective intentions, where the individual finally meets the Other. I discuss Searle's notion of "we-intentions" in Chapter 10 where I compare it to Husserl's notion of intersubjectivity and question Searle's understanding of how people do things together.

This book is both past and future oriented. It critically reexamines one thread of intellectual history in linguistic anthropology while showing ways to move forward, building on insights from phenomenology and drawing examples from recordings of actual events where utterances can be shown to reveal more than the speakers themselves might be able to remember or acknowledge.

1.5   Title and expectations

This book is a combination of previously published essays, which I have revised and updated, and new essays. Even though the chapters can be read separately and not necessarily in the sequence in which they are presented, there is a story that runs through the entire book. It is partly a personal story – the development of my own thoughts about intentions and mind-reading – and partly the story of an interdisciplinary engagement between my field, linguistic anthropology, and other intellectual traditions, starting with analytic philosophy and then continuing with phenomenology and interactional perspectives on human action.

Each chapter is about a different topic, but there is among them a common theoretical concern: the role of reading the intentions of others in the interpretation of their actions, utterances included. This concern, in turn, extends to another key issue in contemporary debates about mind and society, namely, cross-cultural differences in people's ability or willingness to speculate about their own intentions or the intentions of others. To address this issue, I will use the analytical tools of my discipline, linguistic anthropology, combined with insights from other fields, including Edmund Husserl's writings.

In reviewing a few key contributions to what I am calling "the anthropology of intentions," I encountered a recurrent problem in contemporary academia, namely, the separation and isolation produced by hyper-specialization. Even though this is not the place for me to analyze the causes and consequences of this problem, I will try to point out some of the missed opportunities for building on the work of others and possible directions for interdisciplinary engagement. I believe that it is important to reflect on the fact that it took over twenty years for the anthropological critique of speech act theory to be noticed in print by its main target, John Searle. It is also instructive that linguistic anthropologists' position in the 1980s on the conceptualization of social action was not too far from what was being argued roughly at the same time by Hubert Dreyfus, Searle's colleague at Berkeley and harsh critic of analytic philosophy (see Chapter 10). Not surprisingly, given his long intellectual engagement with Heidegger's *Being and Time*, Dreyfus' criticism of the analytic approach, especially of Searle's treatment of intentionality, was, in turn, a replay of Heidegger's veiled attacks in the 1920s on the centrality of intentionality in the type of phenomenology practiced by his mentor Edmund Husserl (see §2.5). Precursors and parallelisms do not end there. Husserl's response to Heidegger's proposal, once he carefully read *Being and Time* after their personal and professional falling-out (Husserl 1997), was to label it "anthropological" (Husserl 1981) because it was too preoccupied with the details of human existence in an "already given world" (Husserl's August 3, 1929 letter to Georg Minsch in Kisiel and Sheehan 2007: 397) and not enough with its a priori foundations as revealed by transcendental phenomenology (e.g., Husserl 1969; Bernet, Kern, and Marbach 1993). As suggested by a number of more recent interpreters of this old debate between Heidegger and Husserl (e.g., Moran 2000a; Zahavi 2001a), the differences between the two philosophers might not have been as pronounced as they (and their students) made it appear. Informed by such historical and critical analyses of past debates, I will address the apparent incommensurability between analytic philosophers and linguistic anthropologists by proposing contextualized interpretations of face-to-face interactions and cross-linguistic and cross-cultural comparison of the encoding of English terms like *intention*, *intent*, and *intending*.

Finally, I want to make it clear that in this book I am not covering everything that has ever been written about intentions by anthropologists or philosophers. What I offer here are linked episodes of a particular story of engagement with the issue of intentions in human interaction seen through the lenses of anthropological perspectives that take seriously the role of language as a human faculty and languages as the historical instantiations of that faculty. The method is a brand of linguistic anthropology that favors the recording of spontaneous interaction and the analysis of what people actually

said to one another on a given occasion. Like all stories of intellectual
enterprises and academic arguments, the story of the anthropological critique
of intentional readings of human action is an ensemble of observations,
realizations, discoveries, arguments, misinterpretations, doubts, and gaps.
In recounting for contemporary readers different parts of the story, I have also
become aware of the forgetting that took place at different points of the
discussion and of the missed opportunities for a real dialogue. The story that
will emerge from the chapters to follow is a retelling and as such it is
a reframing of an issue – or series of issues – from the point of view of
the teller. Any question, doubt, or critique of my telling would, in turn, be
welcome, like all signs of recognition.