

“THAT’S A GREAT CULTURE.
I’VE GOT TO LEARN THAT CULTURE.”
A CONVERSATION WITH JOHN B. HAVILAND.

• MARIE-LOUISE KARTTUNEN •

This is an abbreviated transcription of an informal interview held with Professor John Beard Haviland in Helsinki, where he was making one of his sporadic and very welcome lecturing visits at the end of 2007. Haviland is a linguistic anthropologist, previously at Reed College and now Professor of Anthropology at UCSD. His decades of very extensive fieldwork have been conducted principally among Tzotzil-speaking Zinacantecs of Chiapas, Mexico, and at the Hopevale Aboriginal Community near Cooktown in far northern Queensland, and his enthusiasm for, and commitment to, learning from these communities of which he is part, are an inspiring example to young anthropological scholars—indeed, anthropologists at any professional stage. Here we briefly explore Haviland’s approach to working ‘on the ground’, relationships between theory production and empirical data collection, and his current interest in the physical deixis of gesture along with methodological problems in its transcription.

As Haviland points out to me, however, entextualising verbal communication—talk—though something almost taken for granted in ethnographic work, also poses intractable problems: “We’re already doing a *radical* abstraction when we write down speech as a piece of text” (see below). In the light of his comment before I started taping, that in editing oral speech to conform to written standards “all the interesting bits” are lost, we have deliberately left the transcription in a comparatively raw state, though the urge to shape and polish an essentially informal exchange is very hard to resist. I hope Professor Haviland will forgive the liberties I have taken with “smoothing the turn structure” of our interaction, “eliminating processing difficulties” such as “grammatical hitches in the original speech” and slight adjustments made to the “register” and “the referential focus of the emerging narrative” (Haviland 1996: 47). In the interests of readability we have excluded the usual notations which accompany a detailed piece of transcription.

MLK: Most of your prolific output since 1974 has been based on formal or semi-formal fieldwork.

JBH: I’m almost a dinosaur. There are not very many anthropologists still out there who’ve had as much time in the field as I have.

MLK: So I’d like to begin with the connections between fieldwork and the end product—the monograph or the article—and what happens in the gap between the two. To kick off: can you explain your relationship to fieldwork, why it is so central to your work?

JBH: I think it’s a very personal thing. When I first started out as an anthropologist, it was really, completely, by accident. I was a philosophy student, interested in language but not particularly interested. But when I was in my last year of university I met a woman who was an anthropology student and I just wanted to have an excuse to sit with her for three

hours a week. [Laughter.] It's literally true. I thought, oh well, it's my last semester of my last year of college, I might as well take an anthropology course. I'd never done it—at that point I was already set up to come to Sweden to study philosophy of language in Stockholm—so I took the class and it was quite interesting, very different from anything I had done before.

At some point during the year they said, “We have this summer project that involves fieldwork somewhere in Latin America” —and it was basically the Harvard Chiapas project: a project infamous for doing *long*-term ethnography with many, many students. I didn't have any plans for the summer, so thought it might be sort of fun to go to Mexico.

So I applied for the thing and they took me—only, I think, because I was actually a musician and played curious kinds of funky instruments. And—because they'd been going already at this point for half a dozen years or so—they decided they maybe had the luxury of letting people study something as superfluous and not very ethnographically central as music. So they sent me off for that summer to study traditional music in Zinacantán. No background. No linguistic training. I didn't know any Spanish or anything about these Indians and I didn't know anything about anthropology. So I just ended up spending ten weeks of the summer hanging around with musicians who more or less taught me to play music and I learned Tzotzil in the process because I had no option, there was really nothing else to do.

So, that was a kind of a transformative experience because I found I really liked it. I really liked being in the field. I really liked this kind of pretense of being in another person's world and trying to figure out how to be at least acceptable if not really human.

Then I went off to Sweden and did this year of studying philosophy of language, and I realized that everything I was interested in in philosophy of language I could probably do just as well, if not better, doing anthropological fieldwork, except, instead of doing it from an armchair, I'd be doing it from this sort of position on the ground.

But it really was a kind of transformation: the experience of being transported into somebody else's world and—starting with the assumption that it must be some sort of a reasonable world—just trying to get into it. And I realized that if you follow all these sort of Lichtensteinian questions about thought, about language and about conceptualizations and so on but with some *real* information... The contrast was very strong and I realized that I found myself to be personally much more engaged doing that kind of research on the ground than anything else I'd done.

MLK: How do you see the relationship between empirical data collection—field work—and theory production?

JBH: I may be the wrong person to ask. I don't think of myself much as a theorist or a theory producer, though I guess not everybody would agree with that. I remember when I was a grad student. Here I was one of these snotty kids who come out of philosophy, right? And for philosophers, what passes as theory in anthropology is sort of laughable, right? There *is* no theory in anthropology. So when we used to go to our class on socio-cultural theory or something, we'd all sort of guffaw: “What's theoretical about this?” [Laughter.]

MLK: Yet you use analytical frameworks, obviously—a recent example being the seven performance stages you postulate for the *merolicos*, street spielers, of Mexico. The question

that troubles many young anthropologists, and creates controversy more generally, is whether it is useful or dangerous to produce these kinds of theoretical paradigms in one place, and try and move them to another. Or to borrow those produced in one area to apply elsewhere.

JBH: Well, again, to go back to some first principles here: what is it that makes fieldwork engaging for someone like me, and I think for anybody who does serious long term fieldwork? We all have experience here; you have it when you walk down the street, when you visit Finland for the first time: that something's very weird about this place, something that you can't figure out, doesn't make sense, people do things that are just very odd. [Laughter.] But if you have the conviction, which I certainly have, that people are *not* odd, that they're never odd—or they're really odd only if there is something seriously wrong with them—you can't, you can't, you *can't* suppose that a model that's actually going to help you in one place is *not* going to help you somewhere else. This actually is *true*, even in something as fieldwork-exotic as language, the study of language by itself. It's very rare that you find a phenomenon that's of importance in one language that isn't important in another language. Even if it's important in a complete different kind of realization.

So, we could say, what's interesting about Finnish? Ah, Finnish cases, they're very interesting; they are typologically striking about Finnish because there are lots and lots of cases. So you do all this weird stuff on nouns with Finnish cases and you think, ah, that doesn't sound familiar, we don't do that in Latin with cases. And yet, when you realize what is being done with Finnish cases, it doesn't have anything to do with nouns in particular, or even with a particular kind of morphological realization. It doesn't have to be case endings, because the semantic *content*, if you like, of the case system, is something that we virtually have to do in every language. You have to talk about the *spatial* relationships between things, and an awful lot of the case system in Finnish is devoted to that. You may not do it with cases in some other language. You might do it with independent prepositions, as you do in English. Or you might do it with what are called, in Mayan, relational nouns, which are actually sort of like body parts, so instead of saying 'in the house', you say something like 'at the *innards* of the house, the belly of the house'. In some sense they are all the same, right? So, it would be very surprising for me to find, at the level of a linguistic description, some linguistic category that has *no* expression in some other language. It's going to have an expression; it just may have a different kind of expression.

That's something like the way I feel about, ah, social facts, if you like. It's very rare to find a social fact that's important to me that isn't that important to you. But the thing is of course, if you're any good—just meaning you've got your eyes open—it's the exact analog of trying to find Finnish cases in some Papuan language: I'm sure you're going to be able to do it if you look. And I think the same thing is true for almost any question of interest in the social sciences. If it really is of interest in social science, you should be able to find it on a Mexican street corner, just the same as you'd be able to find it in a Yanomamo jungle or in downtown Helsinki. It's got to be there because, in fact, the things that are interesting about social science have to do with how it is possible that you can have individual psyches—with whatever issues they have—nonetheless walking in locked step with other people.

MLK: You say that you're more focused on the empirical project in anthropology. What does a descriptive ethnography *do*?

JBH: Well again, I think there are some multiple things; they reflect the different hats one wears individually as a researcher, as an anthropologist, as a human being, as a political actor—all of those things in some sense have to coalesce, and so you can do the same work for really quite different motivations. But you have to take the people that you're studying seriously as logical, rational, human beings, whatever else they are, and try and get them to do the same for you. And that, I think, you can only do in the end with long-term fieldwork.

But that's only one goal. Another goal then, of course, is to try to share that with some other people. In fact, it's a certain responsibility of anthropology to do that. So that means you have to do description in another voice. That is, you have to be able to take what you've learnt about x-place and talk about it to y-people. And that already requires some kind of a translation exercise.

And then, if you really *believe*, and I'm not sure that all anthropologists do believe this—but it's certainly something that I take to be a responsibility of mine as an anthropologist—if you *really* believe that people are in some sense interchangeable with each other, that the same kind of flexibility is true for human society as is true for language—that if I take my kid and drop him in Zinacantán he's going to be able to stick around and learn perfect Tzotzil—and there are certain important moral and political consequences to that interchangeability, then you have to make some attempt to try and figure out commonalities. So that seems to be what anthropological theory *can* aspire to: to some theory of social life that is completely generalizable.

So it seems to me that we should be able to understand something about, let's say, the nature of human social engagement by looking at these [Mexican] street vendors and seeing how they both engage and then exploit the engagement—meaning they know something about it that we all want to know. So it seems to me that at that level you can do theorizing. But I'm not sure I'd want to go much higher than that.

MLK: Circulating talk, conversations, utterances, speech acts, are usually textualized by the scholars wishing to study them, and there's a range of methodologies for doing this. Resulting analysis is therefore usually some kind of textual analysis—discourse analysis, conversation or narrative analysis—but your work goes beyond the textual rendition of spoken words, into repertoires of gestures, such as pointing among the people you work with, and the spatial arrangement of bodies and so on. This leads into the study of embedded speech, of aspects of communication whose interpretation requires knowledge of the communicatory context—of deictic reference in other words. The work of William Hanks comes to mind here, as well as your own, and your response to Hanks' research. So could you perhaps begin by explaining the concept behind the term deixis, and methodologies for examining it.

JBH: Think about 'come' and 'go' in English; they're sort of like 'here' and 'there'; 'go' is something like 'move to there' and 'come' is something like 'move to here'. That would be one way you might explain the words: [you might say that] 'come' and 'go' are actually the derivative terms and 'here' and 'there' are the primary terms; 'come' and 'go' are just 'here' and 'there' *plus* some motion—it would make a nice little algebraic solution. It sounds good, very simple, it's a two term system; they're somehow in opposition to each other; the opposition looks like it maps very deeply onto some other oppositions—now how do you find out if your analysis is right or not?

Here's how we go to method and this, it seems to me, is exactly what you need to do if you do anthropology: you actually have to look and see. This is what Lichtenstein says as well: don't just take for granted that you know what the meaning of a word is, look and see how people *use* the word.

Let's take some examples: you come and knock at the door and I am sitting at my desk and I have to say, "I'm coming". That's just English, a fact of English usage, and yet it's inconsistent with our first explanation: 'coming' as something like a 'move to here'. There is something about perspective here and the fact is that it is very complex. And it just happens that the rule is completely the opposite in Spanish, for example, so I'm sitting at my desk and you knock at my door and I cannot say '*Yo vengo*'—'I'm coming' in Spanish—I must say, '*Yo voy*'—'I'm going'. That tells you on the one hand that there is nothing natural about the English choice, and it also tells you that now we need to do more fieldwork on the language to find out more about 'come' and 'go'. And it turns out to be extraordinarily complicated and actually very, very interesting.

It turns out that language itself is linked to a series of—now we can call them—*social* practices that have to do with the way one establishes a relationship with another person and *those* are going to have rule-like consequences for how you actually use the language because they have to do with how you are thinking about the relationship.

This is already a tremendous advance, right? It means that now you're saying, "I'm going to assume that a language or any other set of social practices has a kind of logic to it but I'm not going to imagine that the logic is straightforward." It may involve, for a start, some facts or some features of the universe or features of social relationships that are not obvious on the surface and the only way we can find that out is by doing the fieldwork [which may] result in a huge corpus of observation: many, many examples of people doing things. And then it gets distilled. So suddenly you come up with another system of explaining what looked like very simple facts, also probably in rather simple terms, but now with a much expanded repertoire of potential explanatory factors. And yet it still doesn't go far enough precisely because fieldwork never goes far enough. One can never do enough fieldwork to get it all right.

Deixis is almost in some sense the perfect example of the relationship between the raw facts of human experience and the necessary systematization of those facts into something like a linguistic system. That's the nice thing about language, right? It can't be infinite, it has to be a finite system even though our experience presumably *is* potentially infinite, that is, there are no limits on it, so trying to fit it into the shell of a particular linguistic system always represents some immense conceptual achievement.

One thing that Hanks just didn't do when he was doing fieldwork, and it was partly because there wasn't an empirical tradition within which to do it—he didn't actually give much attention to bodies. He paid a lot of attention to social values and to space but not to bodies themselves. So, he talks about some demonstratives as being generally accompanied by some sort of gesture...

MLK: A gesture which his notes were insufficient to supply... [Laughter.]

JBH: Yes, and in principle, the gestural part could be just as systematic as all the rest: relative distances, space, social relationships. None of us was interested in gesture in those days.

MLK: And how do you recommend recording this kind of data?

JBH: Nowadays you'd be an idiot not to carry a video camera into the field.

MLK: But there is still the problem of: "Now I have it on video; what do I do with it?" How do you systematize gesture? How do you code bodily movement, how describe it?"

JBH: That's a serious question and it's not at all clear. The fact is that the field is still so recent that I think we're all inventing. Basically we don't know how much and what we need to encode, but we really don't know that about transcription either. We know that we can render people's talk into words because we have a several-millennia-old tradition of rendering talk into words but we don't kid ourselves that that does a very good job. We're already doing a *radical* abstraction when we write down speech as a piece of text.

So let's take something as simple as a pointing gesture, and one of the reasons I got interested in pointing gestures is that I discovered, and it was just a pure ethnographic serendipity, that what I'd been noting about pointing gestures missed out what was probably the important thing.

In Australia, people are obsessed with absolute cardinal direction, compass points; it's a marked part of any pointing direction among the people I worked with. I should have known it as this is a language [Guugu Yimithirr] that is also excessive about giving north, south, east, west words for everything. Everything. "Please move your tape recorder a little south." [Laughter.] That's perfectly normal in Yimithirr. Since it is there in the language I should have thought that there must be some cognitive consequence to the fact that you are managing a lexical system like this. But I only figured this out when I was looking at a film of an Aboriginal guy telling a story he'd probably told many times, and I realized that when he gestured, he always gestured in the right direction. So he was talking about getting shipwrecked on a boat and swimming to shore and you look and think, "What does the direction of the pointing gesture mean?" And you realize that when swimming to shore he went in *exactly* that direction, that compass direction, right? Now, I only figured that out serendipitously, but I realized that it meant, among other things, that—if I really wanted to do this right—I would have to take these video tapes that I had of people telling stories and go back and calculate the compass directions of their pointing gestures.

Now this is an example of something like the features of a transcript that is a textual rendition, a textualization of some piece of interaction. It's actually very hard to know in advance what the features are that turn out to be significant. I think I was literally the first person ever to discover that Aboriginal pointing gestures were marked for direction and that means that all of the transcripts that anyone might have done before, of any film of Aborigines pointing, would have had to have been re-thought to try and see the directions that went along with the pointing.

MLK: But once you have established that they are living within this kind of mental compass, what then?

JBH: Yes, well it's something that you've added to your repertoire; you've now discovered something new about how to reduce the empirical experience to some sort of tractable

text, which is, I think, what we were talking about. That means the text now has to include that, which before you didn't know it had to include.

MLK: Plus, of course, providing contextualizing information for whatever's being said.

JBH: Yes. A particularly good example of that from the same storytelling episode that I'm talking about: I discovered that every time this guy points when he's talking about a person, it means something. So the 'point' is some kind of a reference to the person but the relationship can be very different; and you learn something from those different relationships.

Sometimes he's doing an extremely abstract kind of pointing so, for example, he talks about an old man who's deceased whose name he actually can't mention, partly because he's deceased and also because he's described as the father-in-law of one of the people present. So what he does is he says "the old man" and points over there, and what he's pointing at is the place where this old guy used to live, though the house isn't there anymore. Now you notice the elaborate chain of references involved here, that brings us right back to sociology? So he's saying, "You can figure out what I'm talking about: by what I say, by the fact that I don't say his name, and by combining that with my pointing gesture which makes reference to something we share together, namely knowledge of this previous geography, if you like, which has now changed." There's nothing to see there now, there's only the memory.

Suddenly something as tiny as a little directional fact leaks back into this whole story you want to tell, that in fact's your main business to tell as an anthropologist—why people do what they do, and why they do it in the funny way that they do it.

MLK: This kind of extra-linguistic reference—embodied deixis—has not customarily been associated with the anthropology of linguistics and yet your whole research focus seems to have shifted towards it.

JBH: In the end, it's just the result of the kind of fieldwork I do. I think it's very hard for those linguistic anthropologists who are heavily trained in a very semiotic tradition to go back to the sign vehicles, if you like, once they have started thinking about the sign meanings. It's very simple for me: it really was a series of, just, eureka moments. I really did get interested in pointing gestures, before any other gestures, and it was because of the link to this direction system. And once one's interested in pointing gestures then, willy nilly, one becomes interested in every kind of gesture. Partly because you are suddenly aware of the communicative potential of certain aspects of the body that we are trained, usually, to ignore because of our concentration on linguistic signals. What's more, one discovers fairly early on, that gestural communication is not just a second channel of communication, something different; it's completely integrated.

MLK: There's considerable work on body language in psychology.

JBH: There is. It has almost no connection with language. In fact it seems to have sprung from the notion that language is by its nature fickle and unreliable. It's easy to lie. Whereas gesture comes from something deeper and more primordial and can't lie. There's this notion

of gestural leakage, that something will sneak out of your body that you're trying to hide. [Laughter.] The emphasis there is on 'non-verbal', so first of all it's one of those subtracted fields—it's anything that's not verbal—but it also means that it's definitely not *like* verbal. And I think that that is probably a bad mistake. There is a big literature of course, and in some senses it's coming a little bit closer to what I think would be the truth about gesture. There's been a bit of a rapprochement...

My working assumption, the default assumption, is that every piece of communication we do is tailored for our immediate social circumstances. We understand who our interlocutors are and we understand that they understand who we are and there's this very elaborate kind of reflexive fine tuning adjustment of what I signal to what you signal. Which is what makes it interesting for me as an anthropologist to study language at all. If my interest in anthropology is in social formations and the nature of social relations, then language is about as close as you can get to the heart of the matter because it's very hard to do it without language.

MLK: If language is at the heart of social relations, what lies at the heart of anthropology?

JBH: One of the real joys of doing anthropology: you spend enough time in another place until you somehow begin to incorporate as second nature something that never would have been part of your nature at all in your interactions with people. Then, just the contrast of going somewhere else gives you something to think about. And if you follow this typological principle that I was elaborating before about language: if it actually works *there*, it's probably going to work here too. And that's certainly how I feel about the anthropological experiences I've had. You can hardly imagine people more different—in terms of social organization, basic values, in terms of how they use their bodies—than Mayan peasants and Australian Aborigines. They're just poles apart, yet you learn about one by studying the other. The people that I've worked with and the people who have really been my teachers in the places I've done fieldwork have made this lesson pretty clear.

I remember once sitting in my tent in far north Queensland with one old Aboriginal guy—my father—who'd been tutoring me on how to grow up to be a better human being than his own sons, and the postman came and gave me a package containing a cassette from one of my *compadres* in Chiapas. And the old guy said, "Put it on, put it on." And here in the middle of Queensland was this guy spouting Tzotzil from my tape recorder, and it was one disaster after another: his father had died, and the church had burned down, and he'd fought with his son-in-law and someone was trying to steal his land. So finally I had to turn it off and, d'you know, the old guy who'd been sitting there all that time listening said, "Oh, that's a great language. I've got to learn that language." He really liked it. So I thought, okay, that's the way we're supposed to feel: that's a great language. I've got to learn that language. [Laughter] And one should do that with anthropology: "That's a great culture. I've got to learn that culture."

REFERENCES

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