

DURANTI, ALESSANDRO. *Anthropology of Intentions: Language in a World of Others*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. 297 p. ISBN: 978-1-107-65203-3 (softcover).

In his book Alessandro Duranti argues lucidly for two points: firstly, ‘intention’ has been central to language philosophy. Secondly, ideas of intention and how much intentions are seen as informing speech events vary across cultures, and this needs to be taken into account: ‘[T]he salience of intentions cannot be decided once and for all because it varies across cultures.’ (p. 1) This is demonstrated through an overview of the theoretical discussion as well as case studies and linguistic data from Duranti’s field work in Samoa and the US. According to Duranti, the importance of intentions has been overrated and overstated in the discussion of language, efficacy, and interpretation. Duranti does not suggest abandoning intention completely, but offers the concept of ‘intentional continuum’ as a way to take into account cultural variation. He advocates an ethnographic and interactional view that would consider ‘which linguistic expressions make a difference in defining actions and assigning responsibility’ within specific contexts of speaking (p. 1).

This book brings up many big questions and topics, such as agency, theory of mind, and whether there are universals of cognition. Certainly the topic is a fascinating, timely, and very important one for a variety of issues. I personally welcome Duranti’s book as it relates to my own research on comedic performance—just to briefly state my own position. In stand-up comedy one of the ways to accomplish the performative pragmatic goal of making people laugh is to play on intentions and various interpretations of them. On the other hand, comedy often inverts and/or subverts ‘normal’ lines of communication. Of course, stand-up comedy in Finland is predicated

on much the same context as presumed by much of language philosophy: the assumed individual speaker, who works to conceal and reveal intentions in interaction with other similar individuals who take these intentions into account in their interpretations. However, as suggested by Duranti, ideas of intentionality need to be relativized and contextualized more precisely within cultural ideas and practices of communication and action.

The book consists of eleven chapters, some of which have been published before, now revised and updated, and some new ones. The chapters present different approaches and discussions of intention, starting with an introduction to how intentions have figured in language philosophy. Duranti discusses ‘The Standard Theory’ of interpretation, beginning with John Searle, H.P. Grice, and J.L. Austin, then going into phenomenology and Husserl and others, as well as presenting some of the critique that has been offered from within anthropology by Michelle Rosaldo and Duranti himself, despite referring to ‘a dialogue that never took off’ in the first chapter (p. 2). Intentions have been seen as crucial to theorizing speech acts and performativity; ‘doing things with words’, as J.L. Austin famously put it, refers to the way language not only describes the world but is a form of action. Performativity has also been influential in the study of ritual, performance in looking at the efficacy, the semiotic force, of signs and symbols. However, the notion of performativity as rising from the study of language has been based heavily on very specific ideas of intention, and Duranti questions whether the concept of intention as it exists in English is a cross-culturally valid one.

Duranti demonstrates this through a discussion of avoidance of intentional speech in Samoa and how translating the concept of ‘promising’ in the Christian Bible turned out to be a bit of a dilemma, as this speech act is central in the Bible and the linguistic contexts it originated in, but not in Samoan.

The chapters differ in their approach and focus—some pick up a more abstract theme, such as truth and intentions, while others present case studies from Duranti’s work. The combination of different approaches is refreshing and makes it possible to examine the concept from a variety of angles. I found the chapter composed of e-mail exchanges between Duranti, Jason Throop, and Teun A. van Dijk, a discourse analyst and cognitive scientist, of particular interest. Duranti, Throop, and van Dijk discuss questions such as the universals of neurology and cognition, and whether people must make assumptions about others’ motivations, whether on a conscious or unconscious level, in order to coordinate action. This chapter also provides a glimpse into the interpretative work that needs to be done for people from different fields to talk to each other, how the various background assumptions and methodology inform ways of thinking and need to be unpacked somewhat for mutual understanding.

The chapter titled ‘Opacity of mind’ makes reference to anthropological work suggesting that the inner motivations of people are not of the same level of importance in different languages and communicative communities. Here Duranti picks up the discussion on the concept of ‘theory of mind’ and the idea that all humans are capable of ‘mind reading’—based on the assumption that others around us have minds similar to ours, which allows us to speculate on their motivations and aims—but that the extent to which this is considered culturally appropriate varies. Opacity of mind refers to

an ethos where minds are considered ‘private’ and talking about or otherwise prying into the hidden intentions of others is inappropriate. While I found Duranti’s discussion of the topic interesting, I felt that here the approach grounded in language might benefit from a somewhat wider focus (although Duranti does mention some extralinguistic signs such as gaze and how persons may be expected to anticipate the needs of others). In an article on the ritual theories of Roy Rappaport, Joel Robbins (2001) suggests looking at how local semiotic ideology evaluates speech and actions as signs, and makes the argument that when language is not considered a reliable method of communication, action, such as exchange or ritual, may be seen as the more reliable channel.

In the last two chapters Duranti builds his suggestion of a better approach, first with a chapter titled ‘A sense of the other: from intentionality to intersubjectivity’ and then the final chapter called ‘The intentional continuum’. In these Duranti lays out the idea of how the concept of intentionality can be relativized so as to complement a more nuanced view of interaction and intersubjectivity rather than acting as a presumed basis for action.

This book brings up many interesting points, and the chapters brought together in it amount to an important statement in the discussion of intentions. Duranti’s critique of the assumptions made by language philosophy is very convincing. Linguistic anthropology tends to ground its arguments in clearly set out data—the ethnography is laid out and the reader can evaluate the discussion in relation to that. However—and this could be a possible basis on which to take the discussion further—at times I felt that considering signs beyond language could add valuable perspectives. Sometimes I had a sense of a chapter stopping somewhat short, or even the material being cut

off at a seemingly arbitrary point. I will take as an example the chapter ‘Speaker intentions and the role of the audience in a political campaign in the US’. Here a candidate said something in his speech which made the audience laugh. As this was not his intention, he tweaked the speech to make it less funny. This part was interesting to me personally as stand-up comedy very much proceeds through trial and error—but there, of course, the point is to get as much laughter as possible. Duranti’s discussion of how the speaker is not always in control of how meaning is interpreted by audiences is very interesting and informative in what it says about how a particular speech event unfolds, but as the discussion concerned a series of speeches in the campaign, I was left wondering about the candidate’s view on the matter. I know from my own work that creating comedy (or avoiding it) is a very fragile thing, and does not necessarily reside in the choice of words, or even the rhythm of speech, and can be a very subtle question of attitude. In this sense I would have wanted to know more about how intentions figured in this situation beyond what was coded in the speech or audience reactions.

To sum up, this book offers valid critique and excellent points, picks up on a number of interesting ideas, and opens up important questions from cognition to the ways speakers

and hearers co-create meaning to the signs available in different situations. It offers a well-rounded discussion of intentions from many perspectives and the focus on language allows for some very specific and detailed considerations. At the same time, the consideration of these questions would be well served by going beyond language. Here I think scholarship looking at semiotics in a broader sense can complement Duranti’s work and take the discussion further. Intentionality and performativity continue to be important, and cannot be assumed to be the same thing everywhere. Here Duranti’s concept of the intentional continuum will be a very good one to think and work with, along with heeding Duranti’s call to use an ethnographic and interactional approach and following his example in backing up the claims with rich ethnographic detail.

## REFERENCES

**Robbins, Joel** 2001. Ritual Communication and Linguistic Ideology: A Reading and Partial Reformulation of Rappaport’s Theory of Ritual. *Current Anthropology*, 42 (5), 591–614.

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