



The Gift of the Gab

Anthropology and Conversation Analysis

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Abstract. – This paper discusses the fine-grain analysis of conversation and how conversational structure is related to larger issues of social organisation. Mauss's analysis of "the Gift" is related to "adjacency pairs" and the patterns of turn-taking that form conversational structure, particularly helping identification of conversational breakdown and subsequent repair. Social tensions cause problems in communication. Hence, the study of social actors keeping conversation flowing reveals social processes. Ethnographic examples are used from Mambila in Cameroon. The moral dimension to gift exchange can help us understand why dumb insolence is offensive. Failing to return a greeting is similar to the failure to return a gift. The exchange of words shows up the web of relationships that constitute the fabric of society. [*Cameroon, Mambila, gift exchange, conversation analysis*]

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Introduction

This article discusses some of the merits of the fine-grain analysis of conversation that forms a part of my own research in Cameroon. I hope to be able to show that the detail of conversational structure is intimately related to the larger issue

of social organisation and can provide a bridge between the generalisations of "high theory" and social action in everyday life.

Initially, I ask the reader to consider a situation which most, if not all, of us have experienced:

You walk down a street and see some, one you know. You nod and say hello; they walk past without acknowledging you (without even a nod back). To be snubbed in this way causes indignation and affront. Indeed, I do not think it is going too far to suggest that one experiences moral outrage.

Mauss: "The Gift"

With that example in mind I turn to Marcel Mauss and his "Essai sur le Don" (1925), translated as "The Gift" (1954). One of the pleasures of anthropology is the way in which ideas encountered in one context have a powerful explanatory role when applied to a different subject. It is partly because of its wide applicability that "The Gift" occupies a central position in British social anthropology¹ and Godbout (2000) has been among those revising interest in Mauss in the francophone tradition. One implication of Mauss's thesis is that the *giver* and the *object given* cannot be completely separated; an element of the donor's personhood inheres in the gift object. This has been used both in the

¹ Sahlin (1974), and more recently Parry (1986), Davis (1992), and Strathern (1988) have discussed many of these issues, so I will not further discuss them here.