Process and personality*

ASIF AGHA

Self and process

The notion of selfhood has posed no little difficulty for social scientific attempts at formulating theories of personality. A common stock of problems seems to recur in many efforts seeking to clarify the characteristics of the self as a bounded object of analysis. The first and perhaps most basic problem is the problem of the empirical constitution of the self, the question of its locatability and definability as a subject of empirical investigation, whether it be conceptualized in phenomenological terms ('How is the self perceived? How is it constituted?') or in physicalistic ones ('Where is the self?'). A second problem concerns the relationship of the empirical self to the variability and contingency of human action. There is a long tradition which conceptualizes the self as the very seat of human agency. Since human action is neither perfectly predictable nor perfectly random, the actor's self — however it may be delimited or defined — is forced to occupy an awkward and uneven middle ground between behavior that is rule-like, or modelable as rule-governed, and behavior that is not so much random as it is contingent, bound up with a context of action. A third problem, applicable at the level of selves in interaction — sometimes called the problem of the 'other' — concerns the role that interaction between individuals plays in the formation of individual selves and contributes to their stable characteristics over time. Studies of socialization and ontogenetic development, for example, inevitably confront this issue in some detail. Finally, a fourth problem — a sort of generalization of the third, according to some — is the problem of the relationship of the self to its surrounding manifold, to other selves, to history, and to society. To ask after this relationship is to ask, in effect, after the relationship between the orderliness of human personality and the orderliness of its experienceable surround. I will refer to these

problems, traditionally encountered by theories of the self, as the problem of empirical constitution, the problem of action, the problem of interaction, and the problem of order.

Not all theorists have tangled explicitly with every one of these issues; certain answers to some of these questions have precluded answers to others. Descartes thought that the problem of empirical constitution could be solved by anchoring the notion of the self in a separate but equal realm, the realm of subjectivity, and by grounding the notion of 'subjectivity' in a curiously objective kind of thing, namely substance. The only twist to this account was that such mental substance was said to be peculiar only to the habitat of mind, and thus although conceptualized as a mirror image of physical substance, ultimately incommensurable with it. Whereas this proposal seemed to solve the constitution problem with some plausibility (what could be more plausible than the claim, after all, that the self is some kind of *thing*?), it led to insuperable difficulties with respect to the problem of action: substance and act seemed too fundamentally unlike each other. Kant attempted to overcome this difficulty by modifying the notion of subjectivity: he de-emphasized the metaphor of substance, and sought to define the notion of subjectivity in a timeless order of rules and categories rather than in some mysterious mental substance; and action, or at least rational moral action, as itself bound to an order of rule-following of a very particular universalizable sort. Whereas this solution to the problem of empirical constitution allowed for a possible answer to the problem of action, it did not require even the posing of the problem of interaction (or the related 'problem of other minds' as it is sometimes called in philosophy) as a separate issue: Kant assumed that all rules of the mind were universal in the sense of being shared by all who were human just as Descartes had assumed that mental substance was a property of all who had minds.

But such transcendent universalism eventually came to be considered suspect, for it gave no theoretical purchase on the problem of the mutability of the self in time, whether for the case of individual development or over historical epochs. Time, it seems, had become the problem. If selfhood has a discreteness, as it now came to be thought, it is not the discreteness of substance against time nor of timeless rule against timebound event; it is the discreteness of a process. And the central analytic task became one of describing the process and thus to account for the development of self and mind. In the American context, it was George Herbert Mead who first attempted to clarify this entire set of issues by building on earlier work by William James. James had argued that to think of the empirical self either as a special kind of substance or as an entity defined by transcendent rules and categories was a metaphysical

excess entirely superfluous to the empirical study of the self. Consciousness, James argued, is just like other aspects of personality in having an irreducibly processual and timebound character, belonging to a 'stream of thought'; and the self is empirically just the processual awareness by consciousness of aspects of the conscious individual. Curiously, James had a singularly individualistic vision of personality, and to this extent he retained the generally asocial framework of assumptions of those major philosophers whom he sought to refute, namely Descartes and Kant. Thus, whereas James offered an account of the empirical constitution of the self (roughly, that the self is *a process* of reflective awareness), he had relatively little to say about the problem of action, and almost nothing to say about interaction.

Mead attempted to reformulate these issues in more broadly interactional and semiotic terms. He argued that whereas the self is generally viewed as a construct belonging to the level of mental phenomena, many of its preconditions lie at the level of social phenomena: most importantly, that reflective self-awareness is not possible without a socially shared set of 'significant symbols', such as those found in a human language. Mental processes of self-reflection are simply special types of semiotic events: events which have an *intra-personal* but no *inter-personal* communicative value; they are conversations that the individual has with himself. To say that a human being has a self is to say that such an individual can be the object of his own semiotic activity, acts of self-reflection being semiotic activity of a very special sort. Such an account has two important consequences. First, individuals are not born with selves according to this account. The development of self is understood as the emergence of certain mental properties within individuals through interactional events within society. Secondly, the approach allows for the construction of models of the self which are objective models in the sense that they allow for the modeling of intrasubjective semiotic processes only by means of appeal to the data of intersubjective, publicly observable semiotic behavior.

Self, action, and discourse

Perinbanayagam's *Discursive Acts* is avowedly a Mead-inspired attempt to give an account of the notion of the self in terms calibratable with aspects of social interaction. In particular, Perinbanayagam (hereafter, 'P') seeks to give an account which develops Mead's view of self as social process while developing the semiotic aspect of the analysis in the light of certain assumptions to be discussed below. The work attempts to come

to terms with each of the central problems which I have discussed above, and P attempts very contemporary solutions to these traditional dilemmas.

As far as the first problem — the problem of empirical constitution — is concerned, P genuflects towards Milton Singer's semiotic proposal of some years earlier (that the self is a 'system of symbols and meanings' [Singer 1984]), but seeks to reform it in keeping with the processual and interactive commitments which he gets from Mead. Since it is the processual character of the empirical self which is P's principal quarry, certain terminological solutions are pressed into expository service wherever possible: the participle 'minding' is preferred to the noun 'mind', 'signifying' to 'significance'. The reformulation of Singer's notion in a Meadean perspective then runs as follows: 'The self is an assemblage of signs, a more or less coherent text that a mind claims as its own and identifies as a presence in the world of others. Although an inescapably minding activity, it can be manifested in various tangible forms: A descriptive vocabulary of self, an arrangement of an image, and an appearance through clothing, jewelry, or bodily marks' (p. 12). The characterization of cognitively abstract objects as 'signs-in-text' is a type of move quite common to many vintages of twentieth-century structuralism. To speak of the textuality of the self, however, raises certain immediate questions. If the self is a 'text', is it a text whose orderliness depends in any way on the occasion or situation of its reading? Is it a text that anyone can read? Is it equally intelligible or coherent from every possible perspective? If not, what properties of the 'text' account for its differential 'readability'? At least three independent issues seem to be involved in these questions: (i) the context-dependence of self as 'text', (ii) the mode of manifestness of the self to the conscious individual whose self it is, versus its mode of manifestness to others, and (iii) the semiotic modality of signs in which it is said to be manifest. P does not address the first or second issues in any systematic way. As far as the third issue is concerned, although P mentions physically perduring objects such as clothing, jewelry, etc., as signs of the self, the very large part of his discussion and all of his central examples involve articulate speech as the primary empirical phenomenon to be construed as a sign of the self.

The second problem, the problem of the relationship of the self to human action, is tackled in conjunction with the third problem, the problem of interacting selves: 'Here I take dialogue to be the central event of human being and doing; in fact, I take it to be the defining principle of all actions and interactions. Drawing from a variety of sources, I seek to construct a theory of interaction between humans that is dialectical in all senses of the word; that is to say, a theory concerned with dialects are [sic] double processes, as well as with speaking and the logic of relational processes' (xii). Here it seems P's goal is to formulate a notion of action whose very paradigm case is identified with dialogic events of speaking. It is one thing to say that speech-based dialogue — or *discursive interaction*, as it is sometimes called — consists of actions of certain types; stated as such, the claim is simply undeniable. But P's claim is far stronger: that dialogic speech is the very *paradigm or exemplar* of action in general. If such a claim can be made to work, it will follow that all analysis of action in general can be modeled on analyses of discursive interaction in particular. The claim has very strong implications for the question of the relationship between self and action. We have already noted above that according to P the self is 'an assemblage of signs, a more or less coherent text'. But if action is quintessentially discursive interaction, then *it too* can be modeled as signs-in-text. We see then a double projection from discourse whereby the question of the relationship of the self to action is reduced in P's enterprise to the relationship of signs-in-text of one sort (i.e., the self) to signs-in-text of another (i.e., discursive interaction). But the argument that both may be treated in the same way is really just a definitional argument, and the question that remains is this: is such a stipulated identity in any way contentful or informative?

This issue has serious ramifications as far as the treatment of the fourth problem — the problem of order — is concerned. It appears at first that there is very little order altogether: '... the self has no ontology independent of the methods used to describe it or show it or think it; it is coterminous with the terminology and iconography of each culture, situation, and context in which it is presented, described, or conceived' (p. 12). There are two very serious difficulties with this characterization. First, since both the self and discourse about the self are said to be 'signs in text' there appears to be no clear empirical basis for distinguishing them. If the self is nothing other than its representations then it is just as fickle and changeable as any description of it, and particularly so over the time course of interaction and across differently situated events of interaction. The second difficulty lies in the fact that P's recurrent appeals to notions of textuality are in no way related to any discussion of the contextually situated character of semiotic behavior. The problem here is not that P appeals to more than one level of textuality; it is rather that neither order of signs is evaluated for situatedness with respect to each other, or with respect to anything else, so that the processes of 'minding' and 'signifying' are hardly formulated in empirically testable terms. To say that language is the domain where both may be found is not, as we will see, enough. For even an appeal to linguistic data as a source of inferences requires

careful controls on whether such data is being considered within the inherently decontextualizing perspectives of grammatical — or other kinds of structural — possibility, or whether it is being considered within the situated perspective of utterances in context, and not — as P seems to think — to both without distinguishing them.

The account of the orderliness or stability of the self that we are eventually given involves the notion of what P terms a 'maxisign': 'That is to say, the self is a process (Blumer 1969: 62), although it can be organized into a stable maxisign. It is a text, defined here as an organization of signs into a maxisign that is a feature of the minding process of the organism, an organization of the signs it has received from others as well as those it has produced on its own' (p. 13). According to this account, the self is characterized as a 'semiotically constituted habit that the mind constitutes over the years' (p. 12), which dynamically emerges as manifest 'when a mind establishes a maxisign similar to others in some respect and different from others in other respects' (p. 13).

Both elements of this account — the role of habit and the dynamics of individuation — recall earlier treatments of the problem by James and Mead. The emphasis on the role of habit can be dated to James's early treatment of the question, particularly to his famous mechanical analogy where he calls habit 'the enormous flywheel of society, its most precious conservative agent' (James 1981 [1890]: 125). However, whereas James considered individual habit to be a conservative force in social change, he offered no account of the individuation of self from society, nor of the genesis of habit in the social process. This was very much the gap which Mead, starting where his teacher left off, attempted to fill. The self becomes individuated, according to Mead, as a result of the community imparting its attitudes to the individual (an aspect of the self schematized by Mead as the 'me') and the individual struggling against this influence (Mead's 'I'). And the second element of P's account of the self as 'maxisign', which locates the conditions of the stability and uniqueness of the self in the differentiability of self from other, is based on a particular kind of interpretation of Mead's theories. This interpretation is largely the well-known and, alas, considerably simplified version which Blumer (1969) popularized, where action is treated reductively as interaction, semiosis as involving little more than linguistic 'symbols', and where considerations of mental process are divorced from the more encompassing preoccupations in Mead's own work with phylogenetic and sociohistorical processes on the one hand and developmental ontogeny on the other (Joas 1985: 6; Alexander 1987: 217–220). And P's semiotic refurbishment of these notions — the role of habit and the dynamics of individuation — as evidenced in the term 'maxisign' (apparently P's own

innovation) involves a major departure from the theoretical frameworks of both James and Mead. Whereas James had been concerned with the role of individual habit in social history and in the individual's lifetime, and Mead with the dynamics of individuation in ontogenetic and phylogenetic macrotime, P is concerned to formulate no less than a theory of the role of the self in interactional microtime.

Self and code

P feels that the theories of Austin, Wittgenstein, and their various postmodernist revisions are highly depersonalized theories of social action. For him, the task is one of putting the self back in the bottle, so to speak, to devise some method for assaying the presence in discourse of the conscious self of the actor (and, in particular, the *purposive* conscious self of the *individual* actor). The way in which P goes about this is to attempt to suggest that language constitutes a kind of semantic code from which the actor's conscious inner states — particularly intentional states — can be 'read off' during the course of the interaction itself. And yet, as we shall see below, the kind of totalizing approach to which he resorts leaves little room for distinguishing the semiotic reflexes of genuine individuality from those types of semiotic organization in discourse which transcend the self's position as such. To understand the historical reasons for this emphasis it is important, once again, to consider certain aspects of Mead's thought on the subject.

Mead offered a very particular kind of answer to the question of how consciousness as an element of personality can admit of any systematic study. He began his discussion of the problem in *Mind, Self and Society* by noting that James — who in his *Principles of Psychology* of 1890 had developed the modern view of consciousness as a timebound series of events — had turned quite critical of the notion in his 1904 paper, 'Does consciousness exist?', arguing that much of what is meant by consciousness is not subjective, but belongs to the order of objectivity. To say that something exists in consciousness is merely to say that we are regarding that thing from the point of view of its place in the series of someone's personal experiences, as opposed to its place in the series of historical events. The essential point of this argument, as Mead was quick to point out, is that psychology can attempt to study 'inner' mental processes only insofar as these can be modeled from the same kind of data from which 'outer', publicly observable events are modeled. To this extent, psychology must accept the limits faced by other sciences of social process, like history: in both cases, empirical models of phenomena must be

based on the data of public — that is, intersubjectively evaluable — semiotic behavior, acts of speaking being only one special class of such behaviors.

Mead's great achievement was to point out the existence of such a link; he did not, in fact, provide an adequate semiotic theory for exploring it. His actual semiotic theory, consisting primarily of a two-way distinction between 'gesture' and 'significant symbol', remained quite rudimentary in its actual details; in fact, both types of putatively elementary units are really category complexes of yet more basic semiotic types as may be seen by a reconstruction in Peircean terms.[1] The type of semiotic unit which Mead called gesture (a concept he adapted from the ethological discussions of Wundt and Darwin) comprises those behavioral acts of an animal which may be said to have communicative value in interaction with other animals *in the sense of eliciting behavioral responses from them.* The fundamental insight underlying the notion of gesture is that certain acts may have a kind of categorical or regular (or, as Peirce would say, Legisign-based) causal consequentiality (or, Indexicality) in interaction whereby the entailed response or interpretant of an act construes it as an index of some larger ongoing behavior (hence Dicent). If such gestures (i.e., Dicent Indexical Legisigns) are reciprocally organized across interactional turns, they form a particular type of joint or coordinated behavior: when one dog attacks, the other retreats; when a fencer thrusts, his partner parries; when a boxer swings, his opponent dodges. Mead's point was that such patterns of joint action, involving more or less automatized regularities of indexical entailment, are observed both among lower animals as well as among humans. Such behavioral patterning logically implies the instantiation of norms or conventions in behavior; yet such norms, which may be variously distributed across populations, need not be accompanied by self-conscious awareness on the part of individuals who are said to observe them, the ethological concept of instinct being just one familiar example of such a non-conscious behavioral norm.

From such patterns of gestural behavior Mead distinguished a second type of semiotic unit which he termed a 'significant symbol', a unit whose communicative value consists in *establishing identical concepts between sender and receiver.* Since gestures had the fundamental asymmetry of cause to effect (so in interaction, anger causes fear, aggression causes flight, thrust causes parry, etc.) gestural patterning itself could not be viewed as symmetrically communicating identical ideas from sender to receiver. In order to explain the manifest intersubjectivity of shared 'content' in human communication, it was just this possibility of the emergence of the 'same idea' in the minds of the speaker and addressee that had to be explained. Unlike *a gestural display of anger* which is observed to cause fear in the respondent (hence the asymmetry of contents), *the use of the word 'anger'* communicates the same idea (symmetrically), the idea of anger, from one interactant to another. Mead reasoned that an animal species incapable of engaging in the latter type of semiotic event would not be capable either of sharing identical concepts in communication or of having an intrasubjectively stable (i.e., temporally constant) content to consciousness. With regard to interpersonal communication, whereas the former type of semiotic event leads to an asymmetric interactional response, the latter can lead to the successful communicability of symmetric, intersubjectively identical content. With regard to intrapersonal thought and the contents of consciousness, whereas the former type of semiotic event — involving, say, the physiological experience of anger — can lead to a series of causally linked physiological responses within the individual, only the latter type of event — involving, say, the recurrence of the word-concept 'anger' in a train of thought in inner speech — can lead to a physiological series having an identical content across successive moments of the thinking process, intrasubjectively satisfying the condition on identity of contents over the thinking process, leading to the possibility of a stable inner life as concomitant psychological fact.

What Mead had established was that both intersubjectively shared experience and intrasubjectively stable self-consciousness in the human sense logically presuppose the availability of the same type of semiotic units, namely 'significant symbols' (in Peircean terms, Rhematic Symbolic Legisigns): units which are categorically regular with regard to content (hence Legisigns) whose ground is neither resemblance nor contiguity (hence Symbolic) and whose interpretant establishes the original sign as a class concept (hence Rhematic). Mead, who identified human language as the only communicative system having such units, was interested primarily in characterizing the preconditions of intersubjectivity and self-consciousness in phylogenetic and ontogenetic terms, not in offering analyses of actual events of communication between humans in anything approaching adequate detail. In effect, it was a distinctive achievement of Mead's to point out the existence of at least two different kinds of code structures within the realm of animal communication — norms of joint or coordinated behavior (asymmetric because one semiotic event entails the occurrence of a different but consequent event) and symbolic categories (symmetric because they make possible the co-occurrence of shared concepts) — and to note that it is the distinctive characteristic of the human animal that it has access to both.

It was Blumer — a student of Mead's at the University of Chicago, and subsequently a professor there — who attempted to formulate an

empirical science of social interaction in terms of Mead's insights regarding two types of social regularities or codifications, and called it 'symbolic interactionism'. But in formulating such an extension, Blumer faced a difficult problem: if Mead's theories could be taken as comprising an adequate account of adult human interaction, and if such interaction is entirely code-driven, what of freedom and contingency? In connection with his notion of 'joint action' (derived from the Meadean notion of 'gesture'), Blumer contended that social interaction could not be conceived exclusively in terms of 'preestablished and faithfully followed patterns of joint action', that in addition, one had to stipulate the existence of 'unprescribed conduct' (Blumer 1969: 18). Now, of course, no one did or could object to such a stipulation on any *principled* grounds, given the empirical failures of all strictly deterministic theories ever proposed. All seemed well, in a certain sense. The fly in the ointment, however, was that of giving a *theoretical* characterization of the nature and possibility of such unprescribed conduct. Desperate problems required desperate measures. Blumer appealed to a principle so intuitively obvious that no one could really object to it either: 'that the human individual confronts a world which he *must interpret* in order to act instead of an environment to which he responds because of his organization. He has to cope with the *situations* in which he has to act, *ascertaining the meaning of the actions of others* and mapping out his own line of action in the light of such interpretation' (1969: 15; emphases added). Three observations need to be made in this connection.

First, Blumer departed radically from Mead in claiming that the individual 'must interpret' the world in order to act. Mead had argued that many kinds of action — such as the traditional reflex act — involved no interpretive dimension whatsoever. His goal had been to explore some of the preconditions of the human interpretive capacity insofar as it is observed in action, not to insist upon its necessity for *all* types of action as such. For Blumer, on the other hand, the insistence on interpretation was an essentializing tack, quite necessary if the Meadean semiotic categories were to be extended, without any further theoretical modification or augmentation, to the analysis of events in interactional microtime. Secondly, after arguing for the existence of the interpretive process as a necessary concomitant of action, Blumer went on to add: 'My purpose is not to analyze this process but to call attention to its presence and operation in the formation of human action' (1969: 16). In other words, the process of interpretation ensured the freedom of the individual self as a kind of *deus ex machina*; it was not itself a thing to be characterized in any empirically investigable way, merely a thing to be gloried in, as one might glory in the guarantee of freedom. Third, what characteriza-

tions Blumer did offer of the interpretive process involved reductive appeals of two sorts: appeals to the notion of context as bound up in such atemporal and concretizing notions as 'situation'; and appeals to otherwise unanalyzed psychological processes such as 'ascertaining the meaning of the actions of others', without any further semiotic account of different kinds of processes of interpretation or varieties of types of meaningfulness.

Such strategies of decontextualism and psychologism were to become axiomatic in the work of Erving Goffman who encountered Blumer's version of the Meadean legacy as a student at the University of Chicago some years after Blumer's departure from that institution. Blumer's appeal to the individual actor's self as the seat of freedom is radicalized in Goffman's early work to formulate a social theory which focuses on the individual self to the degree of seeking to construct an actor-centric theory of the interactional process. Thus the intentions of the actor become central to the analysis of interaction, and the 'self' becomes something which is always constructed by the actor in order to achieve strategic effects among respondents. The contextual properties of semiotic data are highly obscured in Blumerian fashion by essentializing moves involving such notions as 'situation', 'setting', and the like; the use of highly idealized and anecdotal data becomes a way of forestalling the empirical difficulties raised by such essentializing moves. In Goffman's view, the individual actor, who is at the very center of the interactional moment, is largely an intentional agent mobilizing preexisting social codes in strategic ways in order to achieve desired ends. In explaining interactional behavior the theorist invokes the actor's intentional states and the codes which the actor strategically manipulates. From this point of view, the way in which *unintentionally* communicated content becomes an element of the semiotic moment becomes a matter of some difficulty and embarrassment in Goffman's account. Thus, for example, Goffman is forced to change his mind about the role of language with regard to the distinction between information 'given' (or intended by communicator) and information 'given-off' (inferred by respondent, though unintended by communicator). In his early work Goffman (1959) identifies language as the vehicle of the former, intended content of communication. But in his later work (1974, 1981), elements of speech signal are also viewed as indicating information 'given off' insofar as they indicate frames and footings.[2] Thus in Goffman's later work, language becomes a window not only into the actor's inner self but also into aspects of the interactional context which transcend the self's position as such. However, although both the intentional states of the actor and the unintended 'frame' of action are projectable from linguistic sign-vehicles

according to this account, no correspondence condition is given which can differentiate the two interpretable orders of the interactional moment, the self and the non-self, in any systematic way.

But the study of interaction in terms of decontextualized essences becomes quite programmatic when Goffman offers the most detailed code-driven analysis of interaction that has so far come out of this particular tradition: the transformational analysis of social interaction. The elements of this account namely 'strips of activity', 'primary frameworks', 'depth of transformation', and 'basic transformations' (e.g., 'keyings' and 'fabrications') bear a one-to-one analogy or correspondence to the Chomskyan notions, respectively, of surface form, underlying form, derivational distance from underlying form, and to actual transformations (such as passivization, clefting, etc.). There is considerable vacillation on some of these points. Thus, after defining the notion of a 'strip of activity' as a more or less arbitrarily segmented swatch of activity (Goffman 1974: 10), Goffman goes on to discuss the notion of 'key' in two different ways. The first discussion is an attempted generalization of Gregory Bateson's observations about the game-like behavior of seals in a zoo playing at fighting, or more precisely, playing by engaging in behavior which looks like fighting. Goffman analyzes this as follows: '... there is a transcription or transposition — a *transformation* in the geometrical, not the Chomskyan sense — of a strip of fighting behavior into a strip of play' (1974: 41; emphasis in original). But after nearly forty pages of discussion, Goffman proposes a terminological revision: 'But this type of transformation is more geometrical than might be desirable. Our purpose often will not be to learn how one strip *could* be generated from another by the application of translation rules, but rather how two similar strips *were* both generated from a common model and differ from each other in certain systematic ways' (1974: 78). Here the commitment to the essential elements of the Chomskyan model — an underlying form and a set of transformations which generate actually observable forms — comes across very clearly.

But the actual carrying out of an analysis of interactional structure on the basis of such analogies from sentence structure becomes a parody of empirical analysis. There are insuperable problems of segmentation (since strips of activity are arbitrarily segmented, one can never know where one strip ends and the other begins), problems of regress (primary frameworks can always be analyzed as non-primary re-keyings of other more primary frameworks) and problems of non-uniqueness of the analysis (an indeterminately large number of primary frameworks are invokable in the analysis of any actual strip of activity). In his eagerness to offer a code-driven analysis of interaction, Goffman failed to appreciate the distinctive and non-generalizable properties of sentence structure which serve as preconditions for the possibility of a transformational analysis. First of all, sentence structure is code-based only to the extent that categories of sentence-form are mappable onto categories of semantic interpretation *modulo* propositional content; this is the reason for the insistence from the earliest period of generative grammar, that transformations (rules which change form) should be constrained to be isosemantic or 'meaning preserving' in the sense of preserving propositional content, so that the truth conditions of the basic form and the derived form should be the same. Thus, sentence grammar is essentially a model of utterance propositionality; Goffman thought that non-propositional 'meaning' could be studied in the same way as (i.e., relative to models designed for the study of) propositional content. Secondly, insofar as a sentence is a structure which encodes propositional content, it has a biplanar organization — traditionally called 'double articulation' — into two types of denotational units: phonological units (e.g., phonemes, which are from a functional standpoint denotationally *diacritic*, only *differentiating* denotata), and morphosyntactic units (e.g., morphemes, word stems, etc., which are denotationally *categorial*, capable of *designating classes of* denotata). The reason why the problem of where a sentence begins and where it ends admits of an elegant general solution is that we have two independent functional measures of sentence individuation: (a) the proposition as a well-defined model of aspects of denotational content, and (b) the biplanarity of formal-categorial organization of denotational units. Thus, by the first criterion, the sentence can be identified as a unit of structural form consisting of an integral number of propositions; and, by the second criterion, the morphosyntactic constituents of sentence organization can be evaluated as units of denotationally categorial form, themselves formally discrete because they are resolvable into an integral number of units of denotationally diacritic, or phonological, form.[3]

In general, actions lack such semiotic properties, even if particular kinds of actions — acts of speaking — can be given partial models in these terms; however, such modeling is not possible without residue. Consider by way of example an utterance, which is recorded as having occurred in such-and-such a place at such-and-such a time, and which is transcribed approximately as follows, 'The book ... um ... is lost'. Such an utterance contains some items that can be modeled in terms of sentence grammar (e.g. [book]$_{NOUN}$, [lost]$_{ADJ}$, etc.); other items which have a semantico-syntactic description with respect to sentence structure (e.g. [the]$_{DET}$), but also a pragmatic description which requires appeal to utterance context (in terms of notions such as discourse prominence, topicality,

etc.); and still other items which appear to have no semantic description whatsoever (e.g., '... um ...', utterance prosody, etc.), but perhaps some description within a pragmatic framework (the question remains of how this may be formulated). Of course, some utterances have no analysis within sentence grammar whatsoever (e.g., interjections such as '... oooh ...', 'hey!', 'ouch!', etc.); but even to say of an utterance which has (at least) one description within the perspectives of sentence grammar that it is a sentence-token is to give at best a partial description of the utterance as such.

One type of strategy for answering the question of the interactional function of a segment like '... um ...' in the utterance 'The book ... um ... is lost' might run as follows: the speaker of the utterance hesitates because he is uncomfortable and embarrassed at losing the book. Such a strategy invokes an implicit appeal to context in two ways, by supposing: (i) that it is the speaker who has lost the book; and (ii) that the uttering of the segment '... um ...' has some sort of relationship of realtime contiguity to a coeval inner state of discomfort in the speaker, and that the utterance segment at issue is an index of such cooccurring inner psychological state. If supposition (i) can independently be verified, (ii) may constitute a valid inference; conversely, if supposition (ii) receives independent verification, then (i) may constitute a valid inference. However, if neither supposition receives any independent contextual confirmation, then the construal or interpretation as a whole will probably turn out to be false. Such strategies of radically contextualized psychologism are quite common, of course, when we interact with others as participants in an interaction, and are subject to all the perspectival uncertainties of the interactional moment itself.

A second type of strategy, involving a different and stronger claim, might formulate the interactional function of '... um ...' as follows: just as grammatically valued elements of utterance have a constancy of interpretation with regard to denotation across differently contextualized events of uttering, items like '... um ...' can be regularly 'read' as conveying information about the psychological inner states of the actor by virtue of the existence of a second type of semantic code, a code of psychological semantics, which maintains invariant interpretations about speaker states across instances of utterance. Thus, *whenever* utterances are interrupted by long pauses and the intermittent pursing of lips, as representable say by '... um ...', the analyst can assume that the speaker is hesitant (or uncomfortable, or unsure) about what he or she is saying. Such a strategy claims that *all* instances of such utterances are regularly indexical of inner states of a delimited, enumerable sort. Such a strategy *categorically decontextualizes* an indexical phenomenon in saying that *all*

occurrences of such forms can be interpreted without regard to any other aspect of context; it also *psychologically semanticizes* an indexical phenomenon in proposing not only that verbal utterances can be 'read' as conveying information about inner states with which they have a realtime contiguity, but also that they do so in virtue of constituting a semantic code which maintains invariant interpretations across instances of occurrence. The problem with this strategy is not that different kinds of verbal expressions lack different degrees of conventionalized psychological value, e.g., with regard to emotional or intentional states, etc.; many do, and sometimes such conventionalized value is highly sociolectally organized, requiring appeal to some particular social subgroup of language users for which it holds invariantly as a conventional or code-like pairing of form and interpretation (the case where it holds for the entire speech community being the limiting special case). The problem is that the socially conventional psychological values of such forms do not constitute a sufficient basis for inferences about how a particular actor *actually feels* while engaged in some particular activity of which the uttering of such forms is a component; only a basis for inferences about how the actor *can be taken to feel*, given the existence of such socially shared conventions. This is the real problem of the inscrutability of realtime psychological process by any scheme of explanation which relies upon the notion of code structure (whether conceptualized as rule, convention, norm, etc.) as the exclusive basis of model fitting. I will call this problem the problem of the *non-code-reducibility of psychological process*.

Different theoretical traditions have reacted differently — and often desperately — to the existence of this dilemma. In the Gricean tradition of pragmatics, for example, the actual empirical question of what the speaker-actor's inner states may be is abandoned entirely in favor of speculations about normative restrictions on speaker-actor (involving notions from folk-psychology such as 'sincerity', 'relevance', etc.) taken to be conditions on the possibility of putatively 'rational' interaction as such. And in the work of Erving Goffman, this problem is dealt with by means of a commitment to the notion of an endlessly strategic constructivism: that actors are *always* engaged in the task of presenting a strategically constructed self, so that the lack of fit between an actor's *actual* inner states and such inner states of the actor as are *perceived* by the respondent can be explained by appeal to strategies of self-construction involving deception or dissimulation. These, however, are not so much empirical approaches to the study of the self as they are a priori (and thus essentializing) commitments designed to forestall the problem of the non-code-reducibility of psychological process.

Intentions and 'transformations'

P's approach combines a certain construal of Goffman's proposals regarding the transformational analysis of interaction with the constructivist commitment to the endless game of strategy. P's method combines versions of both categorical decontextualism and psychological semanticism by attempting to treat the observable phenomena of behavior — largely, speech behavior — as a kind of code structure from which the elements of personality — centrally, the having of intentions — may be deduced.

But at what level of analysis and in terms of what kinds of units of discourse process is the analogy to be drawn? P appears to think that it can be drawn simultaneously at several independent levels: 'In this process a phenomenon, whether an object in Peirce's sense, a code in the [sic] Saussure's sense, a distinctive feature in Jakobson's sense, or a logical structure in Chomsky's sense, is changed into something noticeably different from the *previous* form' (p. 33, emphasis added). The theoretical apparatus which P presses into service in order to provide the required account of the variability of speech as process is, ironically enough, transformational grammar. And the very same formalism is considered suitable to fashion a model for the variability of intentions in discourse: 'In each case a basic form is changed into another. Indeed, one can use the general thesis about generative grammar as a paradigm for defining the similarities; if there is a deep structure that determines the surface structures of human languages, there can also be a further underlying structure whose function is to convert impulses to forms more accessible to the agent who in turn makes other changes in order to make them available and interpretable to other human beings' (p. 60).

The notion of transformation is intended to provide a kind of structuralist analogue for the study of discourse, at the same time serving as a theoretical apparatus clarifying the mutability of the self in time. It is particularly embarrassing that P chooses generative grammar as his paradigm model for carrying out this task. The fact that in the usual terminology of generative grammar surface structures are said to be *derived* from underlying forms, or deep structures, is taken by P to imply that the logical relationship of derivation — which he calls 'transformational process' rather than transformational rule — is a *realtime* process of the change of an underlying form to a subsequently transmuted surface form. This construal is all the more embarrassing since the usefulness of even the notion of grammatical transformation so characteristic of Chomsky's early work has been questioned on account of its relative lack of constrainedness as a rule-schematism (Peters and Ritchie 1969), so that transformational components are severely scaled back in modern versions

of generative grammar to the degree that they are eschewed entirely in some of them. But however we may assess P's degree of familiarity with the details of generative grammar, we cannot evaluate his transformational analysis of discourse process in the same terms in which we might evaluate the Chomskyan analysis of sentence structure by means of transformational rules. P's notion of transformational process, while avowedly seeking to generalize the Chomskyan notion of transformational rule, is entirely incompatible with it. For ultimately, the transformational model — or, one should say, metaphor — is viewed by P as providing a generative account not only of the variability of discourse in linguistic performance but also of the mutability of inner psychological states, including intentions, in acts of utterance: 'Each such transformation seeks to encode and embody the precise intentions of the articulator in the syntax of the utterance' (p. 44).

The identification of intentions in discourse with logical sentences or propositions is by no means a new idea. In the philosophy of language, for example, 'propositional attitudes' have long been considered to be semiotic models of inner psychological states, insofar as the latter are considered abstractable from particular configurations of framing verbum sentiendi (e.g., 'believe', 'want', 'think', etc.) plus framed sentence-proposition, and insofar as the psychological 'content' of such sentence configurations can be evaluated relative to the calculus of truth conditions. Such approaches do not, at their best, propose that such models are adequate representations of psychological states in general, or even that sentence-propositional models of psychological states are internally unproblematic (given problems, for example, of extensionalizability across opaque contexts [Quine 1966], and the like), merely that such psychological states are investigable at their clearest and most locally robust in such structural configurations, though even here with limited success. But P's transformational analysis of intentionality seeks to generalize such models from the level of propositional content to all levels of language structure and use, even levels like phonology where no 'content' may be adduced at all. Particularly curious in this regard is P's misspelling twice of the word 'content' as 'context' in a quotation from Jakobson, central to his claim:

As [Jakobson] states, 'The phoneme's sole linguistic context [sic], or more generally its sole semiotic context [sic], is its dissimilarity from all other phonemes and [sic; 'of the same system. A phoneme'] signifies something different from another phoneme in the same position; this is its sole value' (1978: 60 [sic; the correct pagination is 66]). Nevertheless it still stands as a sign by itself, and when it is combined with other signs a word is created, and when words are combined

with other words, sentences are created. Here, too, the phoneme functions as a sign that represents an object, a sound, and when it is combined with other sounds it achieves an interpretant and has an effect upon a person. The semiotic effect, then, is achieved by an act of transformation. (p. 34)

To say that the interactional efficacy of prosodic phenomena is achieved, as P later argues, by the speaker-actor strategically incorporating different types of prosodic variation in speech — a process in realtime of 'managing distinctive features' (p. 39) — is to espouse one of the strongest versions of Goffman-style strategic self-constructivism ever offered, and to do so for the class of linguistic phenomena which is arguably the least susceptible to conscious manipulation and control. But the question of empirical constraints on the actor's conscious awareness of different types of semiotic activity (cf. Silverstein 1981) is not considered by P. The same argument is then extended to relationships of lexical cohesion (cf. Halliday and Hasan 1976). Whereas such relationships are traditionally considered to lie beyond the purview of any sentence-based schema of explanation (since they are construable as holding across segments of discourse text of larger than sentence-scope); and whereas they involve a type of meaningfulness quite distinct from sentence-propositional semantic relationships, really an order of pragmatic coherence projected through relationships of realtime cooccurrence of elements locatable within different sentence-proposition boundaries; P argues, nonetheless, that every such instance of a cohesive relationship is a 'transformational exercise' (without, alas, distinguishing the level of grammatical sentence from that of text utterance, e.g., 'Earlier *utterances* leave their marks on the meaning of a later *sentence*' [p. 45, emphases added]) which 'asserts the presence of the self and its very definitive intentions' (p. 45). Just the same claim is then extended from the case of literal speech in discourse to all cases of figurative or tropic speech, said to be 'present in discourse as definers of the multifaceted intentionality of the articulator' (p. 59). However, as is well known, such phenomena as prosodic shifts and tropic speech are not always mappable onto intentional states.

P's treatment of the failures of interpretation in interactional microtime — termed 'overinterpretation' and 'underinterpretation' — is also rooted essentially in a code-centric view of the interpretive process. The two kinds of interpretive failures are explicated either as failures of the respondent to reconstruct the 'real' intentional meaning of the speaker-actor (involving a lack of 'knowledgeability' of the relevant codes), or as successes of the latter to mask his inner self. To this extent they are further extensions of the view that all discursive action — both utterance and interpretation of utterance — involves fundamentally the playing out of discursive norms and conventions in irreducibly strategic ways.[4]

Code, conduct, and personality

The idea that interactional structure can be studied on analogy with sentence structure to give a kind of 'grammar of discourse' involves moving across several levels of analysis — sentence, utterance, action, interaction — while assuming the transposability of models and units across such levels. I have been arguing, however, that for most purposes such units are not transposable even across the lowermost and first threshold to be crossed. The validity of the analysis of sentence structure as a model of utterance propositionality depends upon a number of semiotic conditions which do not hold at other levels of analysis. An utterance is a very special type of action, one which can be given a partial model in terms of sentence structure insofar as it contains elements which are evaluable for grammatical meaning and constituency: to this extent, an utterance draws upon the representational capacity of language in its referential-and-predicational mode — i.e., draws upon the code of grammar — to achieve such effects as it regularly or categorially has, whatever else it may draw upon, and whatever other type of effects it may otherwise have. And utterance-segments — whether or not they are grammatically evaluable — may be evaluable for other types of norms and conventions. Many such have been described in the pragmatics literature, involving such phenomena as pragmatic 'particles', idioms, conventional metaphors, 'paralinguistic' devices, indexicals of demeanor, honorific repertoires, and the like. Other norms and conventions relevant to the study of discourse transcend the level of the utterance altogether, involving, for example, restrictions on the recruitment of individuals to speech act roles, norms of turn taking, norms of non-linguistic behavior, and so on.

We can speak of the actor's self in a number of ways: there is the self of memory, the remembered self which is constituted — often interactionally — in realtime psychological processes of recollection of past events; we can speak of the self of habit, the underlying substrate of orderliness beneath patterns of activity over significant stretches of a lifetime; we can speak of many kinds of culturally constituted selves, such as the self of moral responsibility, whose existence is stipulated by highly interest-bound normative discourses and practices within society.[5] But from a discourse point of view, the most elementary notion of self is the self of interactional microtime. Such a self is also identifiable with patterns of activity; but it is not reducible to any order of pre-existing

rules, norms, or conventions, or to a purely code-based analysis of some privileged psychological 'content' such as intentionality, without serious difficulties. We are inclined to attend to the presence of norms and conventions of different kinds because they appear to come into play in interaction: the apparently intersubjective intelligibility of interaction cannot be explained in any other way. But we cannot formulate models of *actual* psychological process of actor in terms of such codes, only models of psychological process *imputable to* actor, given the presupposability of socially shared conventions. All discourse models of psychological process have this conditional form and there are at least three aspects to this conditionality.

First, if the data of discourse is to yield insight about the inner states of the speaker-actor, it is always an insight which is associated with some situated perspective on the actor, the perspective of some observer or respondent. Of course, the very individual who is the speaker-actor at a given moment may become the observer-respondent in some subsequent phase of the interaction. Second, observable behavior (including speech behavior) may be interpretable relative to codes, norms, or conventions, but segments of such behavior cannot be taken *locally* to be symbolic codings of contiguous inner states. Interactional respondents do, of course, evaluate segments of behavior for actor's inner states at particular points in the interaction; but such evaluations are always relative to a particular and contingent context which has emerged over the time course of the interaction up to and including the moment of evaluation; and, in principle, includes any other semiotic behavior or event presupposable as having occurred in an earlier phase of the interaction. Third, at any given evaluative moment, different interactionally positioned individuals can formulate different models of the actor's inner states since they may have differential access to earlier moments in the interaction. Consequently, it is a mistake to speak of 'the' actor's self from a discourse point of view. At best, we can speak of the self of the actor as evaluated relative to some temporal phase of the interaction by some positioned observer. This might suggest that models of inner states are randomly indeterminate; or worse, that they are not confirmable or disconfirmable in empirical terms. But this suggestion can only take hold if we neglect the realtime developmental course of discourse. Individuals are constantly formulating models of each other's inner states, at different successive moments of the flow of discourse in a kind of semiotic back and forth across interactional turns and inhabitable role identities. Consequently, we can compare models of the same individual as constructed by different individuals at different successive moments of the interaction. And it is the comparability of different models of the same individual as they are

differently presupposed and enacted at different moments with different degrees of interactional success and failure that seems to serve as the basis of our intuition as participants in discursive interaction that there is a correct or at least a 'best' model of what the other is doing. And as analysts, it would seem that we can only pose such questions as 'what is so-and-so really doing?' as empirical questions only insofar as such questions can be reformulated in terms consistent with the above limitations.

Notes

1. Although Mead's own ideas about communication bear certain points of resemblance to Peirce's semiotic theories, his own familiarity with Peirce's work seems not to have been direct, but derived through the intermediation of Josiah Royce (Joas 1985: 98–99).
2. I am indebted to Schiffrin (1990: 150, n. 13) for this observation.
3. There are, of course, particular phenomena which compromise the elegance of this general solution by constituting boundary cases for the applicability of general empirical tests (e.g., some languages have elaborate serial verb constructions for which the one-verb-one-proposition rule breaks down; in some languages, the morphophonemics of clause union make it quite difficult to specify the exact structural position identifiable as a clause boundary; etc.). Such typological variations in sentence structure require additional stipulations.
4. Although P claims that he is offering a Peircean account of interpretation, his perspective remains — as did Goffman's — essentially Saussurean. An interesting discussion of the same dilemmas in the writings of Umberto Eco may be found in Short (1992: 114–123).
5. See Mertz (1992) for an engaging discussion of the issues involved in formulating theories about such culturally constituted selves, and Lee and Urban (1989) for a number of detailed empirical studies within the framework of semiotic anthropology.

References

Alexander, Jeffrey (1987). *Twenty Lectures: Sociological Theory Since World War II*. New York: Columbia University Press.
Blumer, Herbert (1969). *Symbolic Interactionism*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
Goffman, Erving (1959). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Doubleday.
—(1974). *Frame Analysis*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
—(1981). *Forms of Talk*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
Halliday, M. A. K. and Hasan, Ruqaiya (1976). *Cohesion in English*. London: Longman.
Jakobson, Roman (1978). *Six Lectures on Sound and Meaning*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
James, William (1981 [1890]). *Principles of Psychology*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Joas, Hans (1985). *G. H. Mead: A Contemporary Re-examination of His Thought*, trans. by Raymond Meyer. Cambridge: Polity Press.
Mead, George Herbert (1934). *Mind, Self and Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Lee, Benjamin and Urban, Greg (eds.) (1989). *Semiotics, Self and Society* (=Approaches to Semiotics 84). Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Mertz, Elizabeth (1992). Steps toward a social semiotic of selves. Review of Lee and Urban (1989). *Semiotica* 90 (3/4), 295–309.

Perinbanayagam, R. S. (1991). *Discursive Acts*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.

Peters, Stanley P. and Ritchie, Robert W. (1969). A note on the universal base hypothesis. *Journal of Linguistics* 5 (1), 150–152.

Quine, Willard V. O. (1966). Quantifiers and propositional attitudes. In *The Ways of Paradox*, W. V. O. Quine, 183–194. New York: Random House.

Schiffrin, Deborah (1990). The principle of intersubjectivity in communication and conversation. *Semiotica* 80 (1/2), 121–151.

Short, T. L. (1992). Peirce's semiotic theory of the self. *Semiotica* 91 (1/2), 109–131.

Silverstein, Michael (1981). The limits of awareness (=Sociolinguistic Working Paper no. 84). Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.

Singer, Milton (1984). Signs of the self. In *Man's Glassy Essence*, Milton Singer, 53–73. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Asif Agha (b. 1961) is Assistant Professor of Applied Linguistics at the University of California, Los Angeles. His principal research interests include grammar and discourse; language and culture; syntax; semantics and pragmatics; semiotics; Indo-Aryan linguistics and ethnology; and Sino-Tibetan linguistics and ethnology. Among his recent publications are *Structural Form and Utterance Context in Lhasa Tibetan* (1993), 'Grammatical and indexical convention in honorific discourse' (1993), 'Honorification' (1994), and 'The semantics and pragmatics of verb classifiers in Urdu-Hindi' (1994).