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REMARKS ON THE INTERSUBJECTIVITY OF LANGUAGE

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I

I should like to offer some reflections on the way in which the intersubjectivity of language arises as a problem in the practice of anthropology today. My remarks are based on experience of the development of anthropology as a discipline in the United States, and may not have equal relevance in other settings. The issues do seem to make contact with those raised by scholars such as Thomas Luckman (1971).

Professor Luckman observes that 'language' cannot be left entirely to the positive sciences. I agree, and it is the purpose of my remarks to show a way in which this is so. At the same time, I do not think that philosophical anthropology can leave the empirical sciences entirely to themselves. What problems and phenomena are investigated within the realm of so rich and diverse a field as 'language' depends in important part upon a climate of opinion, and upon acceptance or rejection of philosophical assumptions. If, therefore, philosophical anthropology wishes the empirical sciences to fulfill their task of dealing with language in use, it must play to some extent a critical and concerned rule.

In this regard, I do not think that it is possible to pursue problems of language, especially problems of the intersubjectivity of language, very far, or at least, very satisfactorily and convincingly, if the situation of anthropology are linguistics as empirical sciences is not taken into account. I do not by any means wish to suggest or imply a radically relativistic point of view, but it has commonly consistently been my experience that general conclusions as to the nature and role of language are offered that do not fit known facts. It may well be the case that the import of such conclusions can be rescued by restatement in a way that takes the embarassing facts into account, a way that presents the intention at a deeper level. It remains my belief that philosophical reflection on these matters, especially reflection in the name of philosophical anthropology,

ought to engage the particular levels at which the empirical science of anthropology does its work' that if there is a great distance between general philosophical reflection and empirical findings, then part of the concern of philosophical anthropology is to articulate the concepts that bridge the gap. The inescapable importance of language in human life, and the diverse degree and kinds of importance of language, and of languages, for diverse persons and ways of life, must somehow be brought into satisfactory relationship.

II

The lack of adequate foundations can be readily illustrated. One of the most admired and read philosophers of logic and language in English is W.V. O. Quine. In a well known essay he considers the situation of the field linguist who observes a creature pass by, asks his informant its name, and is told : *'gavagai'*. Quine considers the uncertainty that must enter into the linguist's conclusion that *gavagai* is to be rendered 'rabbit' (or 'Kaninchen'), and concludes that the linguist can never be sure. The conclusion is generalized to the case of the child acquiring a language. So far as intersubjectivity of meaning and perhaps of world view mediated through language is concerned, Quine's behavioral account appears a kind of radical relativism, if not solipsistic in its implications. The account leaves practical linguistics untouched and unhelped. In some sense of the work, I know that *ilalik* is 'jackrabbit' in Wishram Chincok, that the bilingual speakers of the language know it too; that, indeed, I know *ikanaxmni* is another kind of rabbit, that *igunat* is Chinook salmon, that *ikùtan* is horse, etc., etc., etc. I know too ways in which I would proceed to check my knowledge if something suggested it were in error. The ultimate dissatisfaction a practicing lexicographer, and perhaps a methodologically sophisticated social scientist, may feel with Quine's account is that is does not seem to take into account satisfactorily the methods available not just to lexicographers but to speakers of a language for checking and guaranteeing adequacy of reference, for maintaining intersubjectivity of reference. Since intersubjectivity of reference to a considerable degree would appear to be a prerequisite of survival for human communities using language, from an anthropological standpoint the maintenance of that intersubjectivity might seem to be the true starting point of reflection, to which the linguist's and child's entry into the community of those who maintain it might be referred.

From the standpoint of grammar, but with inclusion of semantics as well, Chomsky has suggested a grounding of all human language in universally given features of human nature. There is a good deal to this account, for there are no doubt universal features of human nature implicated in language, just as there is something to Quine's account, in that maintenance of intersubjectivity of reference does not deny the ways in which reference can go wrong or be

partially subjective. Yet Chomsky's account is unsatisfactory too, for reasons not unlike those given with regard to Quine. Despite use of quite general terms, such as 'competence', 'performance' and the 'creative aspect of language use', Chomsky deals essentially with grammatical structure. Even if wholly successful in linguistic terms, his analysis would account only for universal aspects of making sentences, not of making sense.

On the side of social science and reflections on social science, Alfred Schutz has stated the necessity of presupposition of a world of common experience for interpersonal communication, and a number of investigators, such as Garfinkel and Cicourel and Sacks have addressed themselves to the ways in which these presuppositions are organized, what indeed they are, and how they function to give the world its character of rationality. Such work shows clearly what linguistics leaves out of account, and shows clearly levels of meaning that must be taken into account. The tendancy, however, is to proceed with these levels in such a way that the linguistic (and other communicative) means by which they are implemented receive no attention, as systematically articulated with the further levels of meaning. Language and discourse as categories, rather than as systems of means, often are the only focus. There are important exceptions, as in some of the work of Sacks on discourse. It is of the greatest interest to consider the points at which Sacks' work, dealing with the intelligibility of connected discourse in terms of rules of interpretation quite general to all modes of communication (visual as well as verbal), makes contact with efforts of linguists to explain the same linguistic phenomena. But, to repeat, the prevailing tendancy in social science has been to postulate the role of language, not to show how the role might articulate with linguistic means. The effect has been to leave a considerable gap. And if Quine's account seems to leave little room for success in intelligibility, the thrust of some of the recent work in 'ethnomethodology' and the like has seemed to leave little room for failure. One inescapable requirement of an adequate account of intersubjectivity in language would seem to be to allow for the patent facts that intersubjectivity is achieved, and that it is not always achieved.

The cases in which intersubjectivity cannot be taken for granted are particularly clear in the practice of ethnography. It has sometimes been said that cultural anthropology by nature is a science of translation between languages and cultures. In any case, the entire history of anthropology and social science can be seen, from one point of view, as a history of concern with kinds of invariance that would guarantee the objectivity and validity of its findings.

Often enough the search for invariance has excluded intersubjectivity. Predominantly the stress has been on objects of knowledge, or determinants of cultural life, that could not be affected by human consciousness. From the time of Jean Bodin's notions of geographical and climatic factors in the sixteenth century, through the recent formulations of Leslie White and Marvin Harris in present-day American anthropology, there has been a strong tendancy to base a

science of man on factors external to man, as warrant for regularity. In the course of the twentieth century there has grown to prominence an alternative stress on language and language-like structures, as sources of invariance; but here again, consciousness is circumvented, this time by appeal to *un*conscious sources of structure. The idea goes back at least to Boas in 1911, and of course is notably associated today with Lévi-Strauss. (I have traced the history of this notion in a recent essay (Hymes 1970)).

For many reasons, it has seemed to me that neither kind of quest for invariance is adequate to the situation of anthropology, and that the kind of invariance which anthropology can achieve, with regard to the knowledge of others and other cultures, must be based in the praxis of anthropology itself. A reason central to our present concern is that anthropology as a discipline should be able to deal with consciously held and shared knowledge. This consideration looms larger than ever today, because the very right of anthropology, as a study of others, to exist has been called into question. The right to know others increasingly is recognized as a political and ethical question. Communities increasingly resent what they regard as exploitation of themselves as objects of study. To put the matter from one angle, the peoples whom anthropologists study or wish to study find that too often the only intersubjectivity of concern to the anthropologist is an intersubjectivity shared with other anthropologists. There is insistence that the peoples studied be part of the network of intersubjectivity. Insistence, indeed, may go farther than that, and some political contexts may lead to demands for a partisanship for the investigated that complements the often noted partisanship for those who supply the funds with which to investigate. I do not intend to explore the political dimension of the situation in these remarks, but mention it in order to show that intersubjectivity is not only an epistemological, but also an ethical and political question, for anthropology today.

The key to the situation, I think, is that the intersubjectivity in question, while having universal grounds in common human nature, is saliently something that emerges. It is an intersubjectivity that is created, or that grows, out of the interaction between members of different groups. Ideally, the theoretical basis of a continuing practice of ethnography might reside in a conception of exchange of knowledge. The members of a community may be conceived as having forms of knowledge to which the ethnographer needs access; they are essential to what he or she wishes to know. At the same time, the ethnographer may be conceived as having forms of knowledge of value to the members of the community-knowledge of methods, of analytical concepts, of comparative cases and frames of reference, which can help articulate and even partly liberate the members of the community, in terms of self-awareness and consciousness.

If this idea (for whose suggestion I owe much to Johannes Fabian (1972)) has merit, then certain characteristics of an account of intersubjectivity through language, at least of an account adequate to the situation of anthropology, may

be clear. A general account which implies the unvarying presence of intersubjectivity cannot suffice, for the point of the ethnographic encounter is the accomplishment of an intersubjectivity that does not yet exist. A general account that is solely epistemological cannot be wholly satisfactory, for the problem of intersubjectivity presents itself to the anthropologist (and to many people) today as in part a question of politics and ethics. If immediate politics, sheer ingredients of power, are not to determine wholly the outcome, then an ethics of intersubjectivity grounded in the general phenomenon would appear to be needed. Indeed, the disabling weakness of anthropological reflection on knowledge, as on ethics, has been, I think, the separation of the two concerns from each other, whereas the two are encountered together and need to be dealt with together. The fact that ethical questions must be included in an account may be taken to show that there is an inescapable philosophical component.

In sum, I would propose as a vital problem for philosophical reflection and explication, anthropological praxis, ethnography, including its linguistic aspect, as entailing questions of the grounds of emergent intersubjectivity that are both epistemological and ethical.

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