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## Remarks on the Description and Interpretation of Dialogue\*

### 1. Ontological assumptions

An elementary difficulty with the analysis of all processes of human interaction is their transformation into data susceptible of analysis. This difficulty may explain why in the human sciences data of a different kind were, and generally still are, preferred. As against the fleeting processes of interaction and communication, their quasi-objective products appeared stable, permitting unhurried and verifiable description and analysis. The methodological preference of the human sciences for art and artefacts, actuarial statistics and registers, documents and other "material" objects was based on the assumption that interactive processes were beyond exact description. A methodological bias which arose from the technical difficulty in pinning down the processes of social interaction came to distort the theoretical view of human reality. A one-sidedly privileged status was accorded the *εργον* of humanity, at the expense of its *ενεργεια* — to use the terms by which Wilhelm von Humboldt characterized the two fundamental aspects of language (Humboldt 1836).

However, the data based on the relatively stable products of social interaction and communication represented only the tip of the huge iceberg of social reality. Most of it remained submerged in the praxis of everyday life. It seemed that it would remain inaccessible to direct observation, close inspection and precise analysis. The ethnographers' field notes were assumed to recapture inadequately the ephemeral processes "in the field". In addition, they were open to — often rather facile — charges of subjective, cultural, class or, latterly, gender bias. Therefore the search was on for something which would permit at least indirect observation of the main body of the iceberg;

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although indirect it was to use reliable methods of inspection. In some branches of modern social science a substitute for direct observation was thought to have been found in the simulacra of interaction in the "laboratory" experiment. In others it was found in the quasi-objective elicitation of quasi-quantifiable "opinion". This situation prevailed in psychology and, with some notable exceptions, in sociology well beyond the first decades of this century. Even social anthropology seemed to have developed an uneasy conscience about continuing to use observation in the field, and to rely for the preservation of observation on the selective prism of field notes.

The ability to analyze in a reliable and precise fashion the ephemeral processes in which all the various material and immaterial products of social interaction are produced, depends on the relatively recent possibility of "freezing" these processes for later, repeated inspection. This was not possible until the development of technology first for auditory and then also for visual recording of such processes (Bergmann 1985: 299-320). To be sure, the analysis of the products of social interaction, from food, clothing and tools, factories, churches, jails and cemeteries to legal codes, birth registers, musical scores, literature etc. continues to be important in the study of human affairs. However, more attention and effort should be finally given to the analysis of the "production process" in relation to the "product" and in relation to the "consumption" of the "product". Otherwise, (communicative) interaction can be understood neither as part of social reality nor as the source of much social reality.

With the customary simplification of the recursive nature of the entire scientific enterprise, one may say that scientific analysis "begins" with the production of data, *i.e.*, by description of that which has been observed. After the ordering of data on increasing levels of generality, it "ends" by explanation, *i.e.*, by connecting data in a narrative which links antecedent conditions and consequences in terms of causes and functions. The fundamental presupposition is that there is something to be observed, described and explained that is there prior to observation, description and explanation. Science shares ontological realism with common sense. But common sense takes "reality" for granted without question; its realism is epistemologically naive. Such naiveté need not be — although it sometimes was and occasionally still is — the form taken by realism in science. It can be overcome. First, one must reflect upon the constitutive role of the descriptive and explanatory activities of the human mind in description and explanation. Second, one must turn a historically and sociologically trained eye upon the influence exerted by the traditions

(the “paradigms”) of the community of investigators upon these activities.

In this regard there is no essential difference between the natural, and the socio-historical, human sciences. There is a difference, however, and an important one. The “something” that is there for the human sciences shows that it is there in a peculiar manner. If that “something” is to be adequately transformed into data and if it is to be explained in a way that does justice to the human nature of the data, this peculiarity must be taken into account from the very beginning.

As ordinary people we think we know something about human affairs and we act on the basis of that knowledge. Whether our knowledge is correct or incorrect according to some extrinsic criterion, it guides action and produces “real” results. However, knowledge is tested in experience and the relative correctness of at least of certain kinds, if not of all knowledge, is a consequence of praxis. From time to time it is brought to our notice that we do not know enough, not even for the practical purposes of everyday life. Even if we are not motivated by a general curiosity about the “whys” and “hows” of things beyond our immediate concerns, we need to know more for practical reasons and, in consequence, adopt a theoretical attitude. It is an attitude which eventually transcends common sense and, under certain historical socio-structural conditions, it leads to the formation of cosmological theories of diverse kinds. In a possibly contingent line of historical development it also leads to modern science. Nonetheless, under the umbrella of myth, theory and science, certain assumptions underlying our practical activities in everyday life, which are *de iure* sacrificed to the superior insight of theory, are not abandoned *de facto* and continue to be taken for granted.

We take for granted that people do (or fail to do) things because they want to do (or not to do) them. We take it for granted that human actions — unless they are actions of the possessed — are motivated by something that precedes the action in the awareness of actors. We take it for granted that actions are directed to goals in the near or distant future. We assume that actions have intended consequences. Evidently, that is why we act in the first place. If certain actions repeatedly fail to reach the goal for which we aimed, we tend to revise our knowledge about the chances of success. Furthermore, we find that actions, both seemingly trivial as well as important ones, have results — sometimes immediately, sometimes much later in our lives. We also note that not only our contemporaries but also our predecessors — particular individuals — and large numbers of anonymous ones, affect our lives, sometimes a long time after their

deaths. In other words, we find that human affairs are social affairs, that social affairs are historical affairs, and that historical affairs are marked by a combination of purposeful human action and a certain degree of contingency.

This is the source of the peculiarity which marks the "something" that is there for the social sciences and which is there independently of the production of data and of their explanation. This peculiarity, the subjective and intersubjective meaningfulness of human affairs in general and of social interaction in particular, must not be suppressed by the human sciences merely in order to avoid the methodological difficulties which arise from it. If it is suppressed, all that is specifically human in human life is suppressed with it. Forestalling that fatal consequence, another assumption must be added to the two assumptions which the human sciences share with the natural sciences. It is the equally realistic assumption (articulated in modern discourse as early as in the "anthropological" writings of Marx) that whatever universal physical and biological conditions must be presupposed, human affairs, including many of those that put on the appearance of immutable nature, are constituted in human activities, and that human activities are determined to a large extent by a *second nature*, the intended and unintended consequences of long chains of antecedent actions.

## 2. Methodological consequences

In the terminology introduced by Alfred Schutz, what is "there" for the social sciences is the domain of first-order (common-sense) constructs. These are constituted as the typical meanings which different kinds of interaction have for ordinary people. The domain of second-order constructs consists of systematic "idealizations" of the first-order constructs, *i.e.*, of theoretically motivated, generalizing and formalizing transformations of first-order constructs (Schutz 1962; Schutz 1964; Schutz 1966).

Both domains have several levels. First-order constructs are "ordinary language" constructs. They range from vernacular taxonomies, vocabularies of motives etc. to a rhetoric of action and ethnotheories. Second-order constructs must try to reconstruct them all, paying attention to their cognitive structure, and formalizing them on different levels of generality. It should be kept in mind that the formulation of second-order constructs still belongs to the descriptive, data-producing level of scientific procedure. On the other hand, second-order constructs are not simply reproductions of first-order constructs. First-order constructs consist of the typical meanings actions

have for actors. They originate in the practical interests of the actors and are socially objectivated in communicative processes which are structured by the relevance systems prevailing in everyday life. Second-order constructs are selective, ideal-typical reconstructions of such typical meanings which motivate the course of different kinds of actions. They are selective inasmuch as they are guided by a theoretical relevance system, an interest in classification for comparative purposes meant to discover both general structures of historical social worlds and specific genealogies of such structures. They are ideal-typical inasmuch as they attempt to specify — within different interactional domains — the range within which meaning-constellations are typical: from one “extreme”, the “local” (both in terms of time, *i.e.*, epoch and generation; and of space, *i.e.*, cultural-social region and milieu) to the other “extreme”, the universally human.

The selectivity and the ideal-typical formulation of second-order constructs have consequences for their methodological status. Although they belong to the descriptive level of scientific procedure, they are not strictly analogous to “objective” measurements in the physical sciences. The reconstruction of the typical meanings that moves from the “local” to the universal is a step which differs significantly from the corresponding data-producing step in the physical sciences. Second-order constructs are not the result of measurement but the result of interpretations. Strictly speaking, they are the result of interpretations of pre-interpretations. The theoretical interest in the discovery of “local” and universal typicalities in order to account for “local” and universal features of social interaction, social structure and “culture” guides the interpretive procedures. In consequence, the descriptive, data-producing level of social science methodology is intimately linked to its theoretical and explanatory level. The relation between theory and data is closer than the one postulated in the traditional hypothetico-deductive model. Yet, no matter how “theoretical” second-order constructs may be, they are not explanatory theory.

The reconstructions are specified as “local” or “universal” (or something between the two; one could say: “regional”) in terms of time, space and domain. The first specifications are of course those of the data themselves. Questions are questions and answers are answers. In a second, formalizing step, structural similarities are established, thus, staying with the example, the meaning-structure of “adjacency pairs” which characterizes not only questions and answers but also greeting and return of greeting etc.. Another, more complex example, also taken from communicative interaction, are communicative gen-

res. They are formalized reconstructions of the typical and, under certain conditions, obligatory intersubjective meaning models for certain kinds of communicative projects. Such models are not only to a greater or lesser extent implicit elements of first-order constructs but may be also articulated in common-sense models of some sophistication, in ethnotheories (Luckmann 1995).

When starting with "local" first-order constructs, their cultural and historical specificity is evident. They are articulated in the variable ordinary languages of particular times and places. The formalizing steps that result in second-order constructs tentatively extend the range of applicability to other milieus, cultures and periods. In order to validate the extension, the second-order constructs are used as searching devices, as an heuristic, to see whether re-translation into the respective ordinary language is possible and whether they "fit" first-order constructs in the appropriate domain of interaction.

### **3. Interpretation as reconstruction of the meanings of communicative interaction**

The realistic assumption that human action is meaningful and that the first step in the analysis of the meaning of action consists of the reconstruction of the typical meanings actions have for typical actors leads to a number of fairly complex issues in the methodology of the human sciences. They must not be evaded if — to put the matter in Weberian terms — the "subjective adequacy" of "objective" typologies of social reality is to be maintained (Weber 1968).

In ordinary life, individuals proceed on the tacit premise that, as their own actions are typically meaningful to themselves, so are the actions of others typically meaningful to them. That is how they manage to anticipate the outcomes of their own projects more or less successfully and how they, again with varying degrees of success, anticipate the actions of other individuals. The validity of this premise — which accounts for the fact that social worlds are not entirely chaotic — is demonstrated time and again, both to the interested participant in the practical attitude of everyday life and to the disinterested observer in the theoretical attitude of social science.

Although the general validity of this premise cannot be seriously doubted, several methodological problems arise with respect to its detailed workings. What are these problems and how is a reasonably precise reconstruction of the typical meanings of actions possible despite them?

*First*, not all actions are socially objectivated in vernacular terms, at least not in a way that would directly correspond to the motivations and goals (in Schutzian terminology: the “because” and the “in-order-to” motives). It cannot be assumed that there is complete isomorphy between the three different levels of reality: the socially objectivated semiotic system of ordinary languages, the individual stock of knowledge, and the meaning-structure of subjective experience.

Usually, vernacular terms draw relatively sharp contours around the subjective meanings of actions in order to permit intersubjective communication about the meaning of actions. Societies have a fundamental need for (at the very least, rough semantic) agreement in order to coordinate work in the present, to plan joint action in the future and apportion responsibility for past conduct. However, it must not be assumed a priori that behaviour for which a specific term is lacking in a given semantic repertoire is “meaningless” to the actor. To be sure, in such a case (absence of specific terms in intersubjective communication on the level of first-order constructs) their second-order reconstruction is correspondingly more difficult.

*Second*, the degree of precision in vernacular terms referring to the meaning of action varies. The meaning of some actions is objectivated in relatively vague terms and phrases. Whether the vagueness of the terms adequately represents a corresponding vagueness of the meaning which the action has for the actors is an open question. The latter may be even vaguer, or equally vague or it may be markedly more precise. The issue is not easily resolved in reconstruction, least of all by subsequent questioning. Consideration of “context” — more about that later — may help. All these problems are particularly acute in the reconstruction of the typical meanings of actions which are *not* directed to other individuals. Except for psychology, such actions are not in the centre of interest for the social sciences. The methodological problems arising from them are only marginally and indirectly relevant to the investigation of social interaction.

*Third*, the typical meanings, to the participants, of social interactions are almost regularly objectivated in vernacular terms and phrases, in intersubjectively intelligible vocabularies of goals and motives, in taxonomies of plans and courses of action in different domains (e.g., work and leisure in everyday life: ordinary and extraordinary reality), in a lexicon and a rhetoric of accounts, justifications, blamings, accusations etc. The “labels” attached by the participants in social interaction to what they and the others are doing may be considered as first-order constructs which normally represent the meanings to which they are jointly oriented — in their subjective perspectives, of course.

*Fourth*, in the case of communicative social interaction the problems discussed are still somewhat less acute, at least in one important respect. The typical meanings of communicative interaction are foregrounded by the actors themselves. The communicative projects of the actors in dialogue are projects that, by definition, employ the socially objectivated resources of language and other semiotic systems. The "production" side is directly linked to the "reception" side and alternates with it. In other words, the communicative projects are intertwined in temporal sequence. They are embodied in "discrete" linguistic items (minimal meaning units such as words, tonal units, recipient signals etc.) as well as in sequences that are obligatory in various degrees (dialogical "adjacency pairs", "weaker" forms of pairing, etc.). In face-to-face communication they are also embodied in expressive structures and non-linguistic (gestural, mimetic etc.) semiotic systems. They are applied in routines of language use which range from idiomatic phrases to genres.

Knowledge of linguistic and other semiotic systems, of expressive structures as well as genres may be tacit and sedimented in quasi-automatically applicable communicative routines. It may be explicit, possibly even forming part of communicative ethnotheories, and applied in consciously formulated communicative projects. Such knowledge is part of the social stock of knowledge held by a society, social class, in a milieu or group. In short, it is socially distributed, generally or restrictively, depending on the kind of society and the functions of the particular subsystem of knowledge involved. Because an elementary competence in communication is a presupposition of membership, knowledge pertaining to it is generally transmitted in primary socialization. Special skills, e.g., knowledge of certain communicative genres, may become part of expert knowledge which is accessible only in special careers in secondary socialization. Furthermore, knowledge of the social distribution of knowledge, including knowledge of the social distribution of communicative knowledge, is itself part of the social stock of knowledge. It, too, is socially distributed, more or less evenly.

#### 4. "Units" of meaning and contexts

One of the most intractable issues in the reconstruction of typical meanings associated with typical actions is due to the fact that meanings are not independent, isolated "units". They cannot be measured on any spatio-temporal scale nor can they be reconstructed as self-enclosed single "items". No doubt, typical meanings have contours that set them off to a certain extent in the individual stream of



consciousness from whatever comes before and after them, e.g., as temporally and spatially bounded action projects. They are segregated from other typical core meanings, e.g., alternative action projects, with different degrees of sharpness and, as they follow one another in the flow of experience, the individual can grasp them, upon reflection, with different degrees of clarity.

Again, for the purposes of reconstruction, matters are somewhat easier in the case of communicative interaction. The participants in dialogue as well as in indirect, mediated forms of communication, have a routine awareness — or even explicit knowledge — of idealized segregated forms as vehicles of meaning (of utterances, in languages that have words, of words, etc.). In principle, they can recognize them as constituent units in the process of communication. This does not mean that the constituent units are grasped analogously to the looking up of separate entries in a dictionary. They are necessarily “nested” within larger wholes which carry an overarching meaning that joins the “units” syntagmatically and paradigmatically.

Whatever may be the smallest unit of meaning that is discoverable in human experience — that is still another question — it is necessarily embedded in several distinct “lines” of overarching meaning structure. The most important of these are drawn in individual-biographical systems of relevance, in institutionally defined “careers” in differentiated regions of social life and interaction, and in religious hierarchies of meaning. In any concrete case of interaction — here we are especially interested in communicative interaction — the constituent “units” of meaning are likely to be “nested” in more than one of these different overarching meaning structures at the same time. It is also likely, however, that depending on the situation, different superordinated meaning structures will not be equally relevant nor equally salient with regard to the “nesting” of constituent meaning “units”.

Reconstruction of first-order constructs is not a simple matter of identifying “units” of meaning (as if that were a simple matter!). It necessarily involves a reconstruction of the multiple embeddedness of meaning “units” in larger meaning structures. It may not be possible to specify which is the most relevant and salient in any particular, unique historical instance of interaction and dialogue. But the theoretical interest of the social sciences in comparison and generalization motivates even at this descriptive, data-producing level of investigation the reconstruction of typical “units” of meaning in typical structures of embeddedness. As these are pre-defined both in institutional-cultural collective practice and in the person-centered social definitions of “careers” and life-courses.

Evidently, matters are not simple. There is no easy solution to the problems arising in the reconstruction of the meaning of social interaction and dialogue. For certain purposes one may perhaps simplify matters by crude methods, *e.g.*, "content analysis". The difficulties are simply ignored by what Cicourel called methodological fiat (Cicourel 1964). The subjective adequacy of the quasi-objective data is thereby lost. Sequential analysis of dialogue, on the other hand, follows the intersubjective constitution of interactional and dialogical meaning step by step and thus preserves the subjective adequacy of the second-order constructs. Although it is laborious when large corpora of "texts" and not merely prudently selected examples are investigated, sequential analysis confronts the difficulties (vagueness/precision; overarticulation/underarticulation; isolated units/"nesting" etc.) of sequential step-by-step reconstruction head-on and thereby remains true to the basic methodological principle of "subjective adequacy": reconstructing, as best as possible, the actors' perspectives.

Every word, every phrase, every communicative episode will mean different things to different people. This is true because an individual's unique biography and subjective relevance system offer some possibility of idiosyncratic variation. But it is also trivial because the point about communicative interaction is that the participants act on the assumption that for all practical purposes and until definite notice to the contrary not only are lexical items understood in roughly the same fashion but that entire communicative projects, too, with their embedded meanings and sequential realization, are practically intelligible. It follows that typical "units" of meaning and typical structures of embeddedness are not arbitrary theoretical concepts but second-order constructs which closely approximate the structure of first-order constructs of ordinary people. Reconstruction of typical "nesting", foregrounded in the meaning of communicative projects, is possible in principle, no matter how great the technical difficulties and how "uneconomical" the procedures of a sequential analysis of dialogue may be.

These difficulties have been usually, and quite appropriately, discussed as problems of (the reconstruction of) context, both in its widest and in a more precise, narrow meaning of the word. For the methodology of interpretative reconstruction, context refers to the context of meaning for the actors. The task of reconstruction therefore consists in "formalizing" and "idealizing" the typically relevant knowledge and assumptions of the participants in interlocking communicative projects, knowledge and assumptions without which the actors could not understand each other and without which the analyst could not understand the actors.

In conclusion, it may be useful to sketch the main kinds of assumptions and knowledge — beyond the fundamental principle of the reciprocity of perspectives — which are normally not part of “texts” but which the interactants must rely upon when engaging in interaction, the contexts which make the texts intelligible, first, to the actors, and second to the analyst.

*Interactional “context”:*

- a) Assumptions about the extent to which the principle of the reciprocity of perspectives applies, i.e., assumptions about the normality of others.
- b) Assumptions about the extent to which others share in relevant portions of the social stock of knowledge and in the collective memory of a society, a group, and institution.
- c) Knowledge about the extent to which others shared past interactions, from short biographical intersections to long stretches of shared courses of life. Such knowledge may be characterized by different degrees of accuracy.
- d) Knowledge, mixed with assumptions, about the actual situation, more precisely, about the extent to which the world within reach (in its spatial, temporal and social dimensions) is shared with the other participants. Evidently, such knowledge defines the limits of successful deixis and ellipsis.

*Dialogical context:*

In the reconstruction of the meaning of communicative interaction all the aspects of interactional “context” must be considered. But in addition several specific aspects of dialogical context are added:

- a) The “collective memory” of past communicative episodes shared with others. This aspect of context may form an obstacle to interpretation unless it is drawn into the text (“but yesterday you promised...”).
- b) From the beginning of the communicative episode onward the participants start sharing the memory (variously precise and accurate) of what has been said and done. At any subsequent moment of the episode the preceding parts of the communicative and, generally, interactive sequence are automatically relevant to, although not necessarily salient in, the participants’ practical understanding of the ongoing communicative process. Therefore they are relevant to the analyst’s reconstruction. Occasionally a preceding part also becomes salient and is reintroduced into the “text” (“but you just said, that...”), thereby making explicit what is im-

plicit in all dialogue. This is context in the narrowest and most precise meaning of the term.

- c) Finally, there may be a sort of "intertextuality" entering the context of dialogue. The participants may recognize quotes from someone known to them — but not to the analyst — or to media "texts" known to them but not to the analyst. Reconstruction will be near impossible unless the quote is marked prosodically. This is usually the case; but then one only knows *that* something is quoted; the meaning of the quote for the ongoing communicative process may not be easy to decipher. It becomes fully accessible only when it is reconstructed by the actors themselves.

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