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The dynamism of plurals: an essay on equivocal compatibility[1]

In ethnographic accounts equivocation is often read as error. To the contrary, in this paper I give an example of a situation of equivocal compatibility from fieldwork among Eurasians in Macao (southern China) during the early 1990s. In the course of intersubjective interaction, a creative process occurs of successive transformation of the pertinent angles of identification and differentiation. The use of the first person plural is a constant mode of producing and altering identification and differentiation in such a way that what is singular and what is plural is constantly being re-assessed. This dynamism of plurals both elicits response from the persons involved in the interaction and marks the world that surrounds them. The aim of the paper is to explore how belief relates with identity in a dynamic way that is mutually constitutive.

Key words equivoque, person, Macao, ethnicity, plural, compatibility

This essay is an exegesis of the concept of equivocal compatibility based on an ethnographic example collected in Macao (southern China) during the early 1990s. At a dinner party, my wife and I witnessed a person manipulating the first person plural in different languages with equivocal results, thus creating a dynamic situation of identification and differentiation that was, at the same time, deeply ambiguous and potentially dangerous but also, ultimately, rewarding. Such instances of equivocation are often read as error. This is a mistake, it is argued. I propose that they can be read in at least three levels by relation to the situation of compatibility within which they emerge. The aim of the essay is to explore how belief relates with identity in a dynamic way that is mutually constitutive.[2]

Verisimilitude and universality

Following proper anthropological practice as enshrined in one of the most commonly encountered rhetorical devices for writing anthropological essays, I will start by narrating a series of events that I experienced and then proceed to engage in

generalisation. Much like my colleagues do when they write their essays in this way, my aim is to establish the relevance and the verisimilitude of the generalisations to which I will proceed.

Before that, however, I will depart from anthropological convention in declaring outright that the generalisations you will find in the second half of the paper did not emerge from the ethnographic exercise upon which I base my story. To the contrary, the desire to explore these generalisations in a creative way was what led me to undertake this ethnography which took me to a foreign city (Macao in southern China) for a considerable number of fieldwork trips in the course of the 1990s. As I trust you will grant me when I get to these generalisations, they do not arise out of the blue. Rather, they follow on a long-standing tradition of debate concerning what it is to be human and how to interpret what humans do. Such debates, therefore, are not only grounded in the already long history of modern academic institutions throughout the world, but they are also the heirs to an uninterrupted tradition of European scholarship and learning dating back to Grecian times.

I do not deny that. However, such an apparently obvious statement may be misleading, for it depends on a process of ideological silencing of the mirific number of chains of influence that cut across these more easily visible moorings and that lead to all times and all places of human history. I do not care to contribute to that silencing and thus I insist that, whilst framed in the language of modern academic discussion, deeply marked as it is by the recent hegemony of Western Europe, my considerations aim to respond to problems that are universal. Whether I succeed or not in making a useful contribution is not for me to judge, but I cannot be blamed for trying.

In fact, some of these debates – such as what 'equivocation' means and what it is to be 'compatible' – are central to any human context and they have left their historical traces even in the history of the words we use. You might well argue that, come what may, I am still rooted in the broad area constituted by the four or five Western European languages that I regularly use in my academic life. But I must dissent for, over and beyond that, my discourse is also marked by my familiarity with two centuries of anthropologically driven ethnographic writing – the rich heritage of our discipline – and by the systematic effort I have undertaken to be familiar with the scholarly and literary writings of the Far East, even if in translation.

In short, although I write my story from a specific perspective, I ask you please not to fail to see the rainbow-coloured sparkles that emerge between my words and that point to the enormous cauldron of human differentiation that is so deeply inscribed into what we say today that none of us can hope to be able to draw out a complete map of the influences, perspectives, differentiations and hesitations that motivate his or her choice of words and choice of story. As it happens, I start from a dinner table in a specific city, at a specific conjuncture in history, in the company of specifiable people – but I am contributing to a discourse that is for all humans and for all times and that looks back for inspiration in all humans at all times: science, if you will.

If I start from a narrative of actually experienced events it is because that is a proven mode of convincing you that what I say is verisimilitudinous. I count on the fact that all of you have acquired the instruments to interpret encounters of the kind I will describe, which will open up your disposition to see this one as a likely event. I do not make a claim to prejudging what your actual life experiences were – I cannot hope to imagine who will read this paper. But I can presume that the reader will have a fair idea of the sort of situation I will be talking about and will, thus, be able to adjust his or her angle

to the point of, eventually, seeing what I extract from this experience as reasonable suppositions.

My point here is similar to that of Pär Segerdahl when he claims that, when we begin to speak for the first time, what we acquire is a 'primary language' which is not to be confused with our mother tongue. The latter is merely *a* language among others and in the course of our lives most of us usually come to learn other languages. If we do so, however, it is only because we have had a primary one. It is in this sense that I agree with people who claim that, at root, we are all polyglots. This primary language is a condition for being able to learn languages, so 'it is not one of the things we can be said to learn' (Segerdahl 2001: 504). We do not properly speaking learn it because we did not pre-exist it, we were formed by it. I tend to agree with Davidson that 'the linguistic skills people typically bring to conversational occasions can and do differ considerably, but mutual understanding is achieved through the exercise of the imagination, appeal to general knowledge of the world, and awareness of human interests and attitudes' (2005: 110).

There is a similar kind of primacy to the experience of sitting down to share food with people of whose speech we are trying to make sense. As we try to interpret them, we know full well that they are also trying to make sense of us; as we are trying to find out from their responses how they accept us, so they are too. The sharing of a common substance disposes us to feel at one with each other. Such intersubjective situations are formative of our self, they do not postdate it. On such a basis, then, we proceed to learn different ways of doing it: table manners, food tastes, rules of etiquette, forms of address. Sitting at table, therefore, is very specific in some senses and most general in others.

The dynamism of plurals: an event

My wife and I were in Macao on a fieldwork visit as part of a research project subsidised by the Cultural Institute of the city. In the early 1990s, the city was undergoing major change and, in particular, the long-term residents were having to adapt to a major political upheaval that was to be expected in December 1999 when, after four and a half centuries of Portuguese rule, this small coastal city would be handed over to the People's Republic of China as the result of a joint agreement between the two states signed in 1987. I was studying the Eurasian population – locally known as *macaenses* – who have had a major role to play in the administration of the city since its beginnings in the 16th century. My presence was well known to most Macanese as I had interviewed a fair number of them and I had engaged in public debates about their role in the city.

A group of young Macanese professionals decided to form an association to protect their interests in the face of the coming changes. So, through the mediation of the Cultural Institute's Vice-President, who was also a Macanese, they called on me to have dinner with them, in my capacity as a 'specialist' in Macanese issues. I gladly accepted, as this was a marvellous occasion for carrying out fieldwork. I welcome situations where I can be part of proceedings without having to enact an interview situation – I have always felt that the need to make questions (that then have to be answered, implicitly rightly or wrongly) is one of the major methodological hurdles of socio-scientific research. Thankfully, here the situation was inverted, as they felt I might be able to provide them with suggestions. As often happens, in the end, they had nothing very specific to ask of me and I am convinced that we all benefited equally from the free debate that ensued.

The group at the table was made up of six or seven men, all of whom with some kind of higher education and with jobs either in the Administration or close to its interests but who presented a mixed appearance phenotypically: some looked Portuguese, some Chinese; one was the second-generation offspring of a Capeverdian creole family; another the offspring of a family of old-time Chinese converts to Catholicism. Apart from them, the group round the large round table in the Chinese restaurant also comprised me, a Portuguese academic with no long-term relations to the city, and my wife who was born in the city of Chinese parents and whose spoken Portuguese is fluent but recently acquired.

Sitting between me and my wife was a young police officer of mixed Sino-Portuguese descent. He spoke alternately to her and to me as the dinner evolved. At one stage, I noticed that my wife was looking at me so as to call my attention but I did not immediately understand her message. In fact, her Portuguese turned out to be far better than my Cantonese and she had noticed something that I had not: the man between us, when he turned to me or replied to someone who was addressing me, spoke in accented but fluent Portuguese and used systematically the first person plural (*nós*) to discuss the identity dilemmas that faced the Macanese; however, when he turned to her or the people on her side of the table, he spoke in fluent unaccented Cantonese. The thing that fascinated her was that he also used the first person plural in Cantonese (*ngo dei*).

In short, he was undertaking a kind of instantaneous ethnic repositioning as he turned to one side and the other. There was equivocation, however, both in the simultaneity and in that it remained uncertain whether he was repositioning himself (as my wife and I assumed at first) or repositioning us (as we later came to contemplate). Come what may, in Macao's ethnic landscape, Chineseness and Portugueseness are perceived as being mutually exclusive, as they are the two poles of a centuries-long dispute for hegemony over the city's inhabitants and their territory.

The Macanese Eurasians have traditionally sided with the Portuguese. Since the late 1960s, however, when it became clear that the Portuguese were going to leave the city some day, they started a process of re-drawing the ethnic boundaries (cf. Pina-Cabral and Lourenço 1993, Pina-Cabral 2002). Our very dinner was aimed at debating this precise issue; an issue this man was resolving in the most expedite but equivocal of all manners by opting for the first person plural both when he spoke to a Portuguese in Portuguese and to a Chinese in Cantonese. Our being husband and wife did not help to resolve this ambiguity, it only played a role in that we managed to become aware of his deft performance, which we might not have otherwise.

Now, you might argue: this man felt that he was a Chinese and a Portuguese at the same time, so why should he not use the first person plural in relation to both identities? This is what you might say, for example, of a man who feels he is a fan of Barça and also feels he is a medical doctor. He might correctly use the first person plural by reference to the two collectives in the same sentence without any fear of contradiction, ambiguity or equivocation.

Still, this does not apply to the present situation as, in the ethnic field within which this man was placed, Portugueseness and Chineseness are perceived as being mutually exclusive; and, if the equivocation was based on repositioning us and not him, he should have known (as he most certainly did) that we would not be willing partners to it. But the gap is yet broader, as the topic of the dinner conversation was precisely about ethnicity and the ethnic category that was being debated was neither one of these two

but a third one, Macaneseness. Now, this third category is necessarily ambiguous, as it is placed both institutionally and ethnically in between the other two. Still, if you ask any Portuguese or Chinese in the city whether they are Macanese, their emphatic response will be that they are not.[3] The contrary dissociation, however, is less easily encountered. In short, we are dealing with a situation of asymmetry and of ambiguity and that is what this man's apt performance reflected.

Diversion and equivocation

As I contemplate how to interpret his gesture, I am reminded of Montaigne's famous essay 'On diversion', where he argues that when 'some painful idea gets hold of me; I find quicker to change it than to subdue it' (1993: 941). In human affairs, he claims, one is often confronted with dilemmatic situations that bear no solution. Still, as life inevitably goes on, all one can do is to shift the focus of one's attention. Diversion, for him, is a way of continuing with an inescapable situation without having to resolve it – but he is fully aware of the irony *and* tragedy of what it involves. 'Those who have to cross over some terrifyingly deep abyss are told to close their eyes or to avert them' (1993: 938). But what if they were to miss a step, falling into the actual abyss? There is irony and even humour when one disregards momentarily the principles of rational coherence that define one as human, allowing oneself to be deflected from one's own thoughts. Montaigne's essay dwells at length on that most wondrous of all topics: wilful self-deception and the extraordinary way that humans have of diverting their own thoughts and emotions.

Did this man's equivocation involve wilful self-deception?[4] He was faced with a dilemma that he could not bear: if he identified with one of us, in our neatly divided ethnic and cultural identities, he implicitly differentiated himself from the other. Identification provided him with a sense of comfort and security in the face of his city's uncertain future; open differentiation, on the contrary, caused him unease. So he closed his eyes, as it were, and pretended that the ethnic abyss was not there right in front of him, gaping wide. The result was a situation of *equivocal compatibility*.

I propose that we should rest here for a while and examine what might be implied by the choice of this term *equivocation*. At the origin of the word lies a conjugation between the Latin *aequus* meaning 'equal' and *vocare* meaning 'to call'. The adjective 'equivocal' has a varied number of interpretations pointing on the whole to the quality of something that is uncertain or capable of double interpretation. The word 'equivoque' can mean homonym. But the *Oxford English Dictionary* relates yet another usage of the term that is especially interesting for us: in music, the technical term 'equivocal chord' means 'one which may be resolved into different keys without changing any of its tones'.

Now, the precise nature of the equivocation in which this young police officer was engaging was itself equivocal, because it depended on an implicit hypothesis concerning

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3   The Chinese born in the city do not refer to themselves as 'Macanese' but use the Chinese name for their city, which has no etymological connection with the Portuguese name – they call themselves *Ou Mun Yan*.

4   cf. Donald Davidson's essay on weakness of the will in *Essays on actions and events* (2001 [1980]: 21–42).

what my wife and I were feeling about identifying with him – something that he could not control but that he intuited. This is why I like the musical usage cited above, as it implies a kind of processual performance that resolves itself in the actual response of the interlocutors. To wit, he throws out those pronouns much like one might throw a net because one suspects there might be fish underneath the shining watery surface. One then waits to see what comes out in response. What comes out might further one's interests or it might not, but what is especially apposite in this example is that, at the start, the man was not positively certain as to where his actual interests laid. The point I want to make is that we were having a discussion concerning ethnic identity in a deeply divided city where the newspapers were daily reporting on people's interpretations of the meanings and implications of ethnic categories and where the city's administration itself was paying for an anthropologist from far away to come and decipher the nature of the debate.

In such a context, the first person plural simultaneously employed in Portuguese to speak to a Portuguese person and in Cantonese to speak to a Chinese person necessarily involved contradiction, showing that the speaker was engaging in some sort of process of recurrent re-classification. Admittedly, our being husband and wife meant that we were presumably *compatible* and that he was on safe ground. To go on with our fishing metaphor: we might presume that our being married made him think that fish were passing underneath and encouraged him to throw his net. There is, therefore, a matter of compatibility to which I will return at a later moment.

Still, he was practising equivocation. Now, the *Oxford English Dictionary* provides a definition for this term that is commonly encountered but that does not satisfy me in this case: 'the expression of a virtual falsehood in the form of a proposition which (in order to satisfy the speaker's conscience) is verbally true'. If we were to use this definition in this context it would imply the occurrence of (a) falsehood and (b) a play on words resulting from an incorrect analysis of the situation. But, concerning falsehood, I do not think we can say that he was being false, that he was lying in some way; whilst concerning verbal adequateness, I also do not like the implication that a word might be correctly used in a wrong fashion – that the meaning of a word somehow lies outside its correct use.

Compatibility

What I like best about this example is the way it illustrates how words (or thoughts) and actions are deeply intermeshed. He was not using words wrongly or falsely, but he was classifying people with words. The equivocation lies less in what the man said than in who he was and who we were; in the implications for our respective identities of what he said. He was making use of pronouns that rearranged the people he talked to in relation to him and, in doing so he was hoping to bind these people to him by including himself within the collectives that included them. I think we are entitled to presume that he did that because he wanted to satisfy or at least that he somehow wanted to engage with us.

Here, then, we return to the issue of *compatibility*, a word that the dictionaries tell us means 'capable of existing together in harmony' and that derives from the Latin *compati*, which joins *cum* (with) with *pati* (suffer; allow; undergo) to mean 'suffer with one; have pity, have compassion'. In short, the idea of existing together finds its roots

in Western European languages in a sense of sharing someone's fate in a context of suffering. All this need not take us very far. All we require for our present purposes is to recognise that the notion of compatibility applies in this case; it is adequate to describe what happens when two people share a meal and try to find common categories by taking recourse to the first person plural – a primary means of eliciting identification. Note, more than experiencing identification, this man was eliciting it and, thus, he was assuaging his own feeling of ethnic ambiguity resulting from the fact that (a) he was neither Portuguese nor Chinese, but (b) he felt very close to both categories and (c) his own identity as Macanese was being subjected to deep questioning, liable to cause insecurity in him. Now you may claim this is only an interpretative hypothesis – and you are right, this is the interpretative hypothesis that I managed to come up with after having lived in Macao and having shared those moments with him and other people like me and him.

To sum up what I have unearthed so far: I can safely qualify this man's verbal actions as a form of *equivocal compatibility*. This is a notion that I arrived at whilst writing about the material I collected in Macao and that I have first expounded upon concerning a much more complex case than this one (cf. 2002: 105–25).[5] The present case is useful precisely because of its relative simplicity. Since then the concept has been put to use in very interesting ways by Susana de Matos Viegas, in her ethnography of the Tupinambá of Olivença (Brazil; 2007: 237–73).

At the outset, a case of equivocal compatibility occurs when two persons who share a context of action (i.e. who have common interests, in the broadest sense of a joint engagement in the world – cf. Pina-Cabral and Bestard Camps 2003) define the terms of those actions they jointly engage upon in divergent ways. Methodologically, this formulation is very useful because it allows the ethnographer to describe situations such as the one above (where we do not observe a correspondence between shared cultural assumptions, verbal formulations and actions) without having to presume irrationality. Ethnographic experience suggests that situations of this kind are far more frequent than one might otherwise assume if one were to rely upon the sort of sociocentric assumptions that continue to characterise the methodological expectations of most anthropologists. I call these expectations 'primitivist' because they rely on a default notion of the 'field' as essentially monocultural, monolingual, technologically simple and institutionally stable (cf. Pina-Cabral 2009).

Indeterminacy

To the contrary, I argue that equivocal compatibility is a potential of all social interaction, both in the undecidedness of the meaning we attribute to each other's formulations and in our proneness to identify with our interlocutors. Let us consider the first aspect by relying on Donald Davidson's notion of the indeterminacy of interpretation. Following Quine, Davidson argues that 'what we can say and understand about the propositional attitudes of others should be what we can capture by matching up our own sentences to those attitudes' (2001: 77). This is essentially a negative thesis, that is, one that establishes limits, countering more optimistic views concerning the possibilities of interpretation:

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5   I am indebted to Jehanne Féblot-Augustins for her help with my first formulation of the issue, cf. Pina-Cabral (1999).

'it is an attack on the idea that meanings can be captured in exactly one way' (2005: 317). As Davidson puts it, 'sentences can be used in endless different ways to keep track of the attitudes of others, and of the meanings of their sentences. [...] there is no more to the identification of meanings than is involved in capturing those complex empirical relations' (2005: 317). Thus, interpretation is always basically indeterminate as it is never absolute and it is always dependent on a relationship between the one who interprets, the one who is interpreted and the world that surrounds them and, without which, there would be no referential frame for interpretation. In his words, 'without a social environment nothing could count as misapplying words in speech' (2005: 113).

The point of the matter is that what is described is not in any way less real than it would have been had it been possible to have direct access to other people's categories, and that indeterminacy doesn't only occur because there are two persons. 'Indeterminacy occurs whenever a vocabulary is rich enough to describe a phenomenon in more than one way' (2005: 316) and, 'given the richness of all natural languages, it would be surprising if it were not always possible to describe the facts of any discipline in many ways' (2005: 317). In this sense, indeterminacy is not a hindrance to human relations but it is precisely due to the fact that we have different perspectives that communication and meaning are possible. We approach here Wittgenstein's concept of the language game as the fountain of all meaning (cf. 2001 [1945]: 2e–4e).

You may well argue, therefore, that since indeterminacy is at the root of meaning, it makes no sense to speak of equivocation, for we would only be using this (possibly value-laden) word to describe what, in any case, cannot fail to happen. I would like to counter that, however: even though indeterminacy is indeed at the root of all meaning, there are sound methodological reasons for using a term such as equivocation in a number of specifiable contexts. In most situations of indeterminacy, the continuation of the interaction provides for a dynamic process of approximation of interpretation. This is a licit implication of Davidson's principle of interpretive charity (e.g. 2001: 211). In situations of equivocal compatibility, as defined above, however, this process of 'charity' seems to be arrested. The action context is shared but the definitional difference is allowed to ride on – the process of interpretive charity is switched off. The dynamics of approximation are arrested by the agents' interests; they share their interests in the situation but they refuse to contemplate the irrational implications of this joint interest; that is, of their compatibility. At a collective level, the process is not unlike that of weakness of the will – there is a silence, something is surd in their intentional behaviour, as Davidson would have it (2001 [1980]: 42).

Equivocation and dilemma

It is worthwhile noticing that researchers in the field of applied communication have examined the practical uses of equivocal messages in ways that, on the whole, help to clarify our concept. Susan Kline and colleagues equate 'equivocal communication' with strategic ambiguity, defining it as 'the use of strategic language to provide reasonable answers to questions that, if answered in clear, direct communication, could cause negative repercussions' (Kline *et al.* 2009: 40). They find that, among the executives they studied, equivocal communication takes place through a number of techniques that Montaigne would have classified as deviation and it is often a response to the need to satisfy conflicting goals (2009: 42). Typically, people use it when they are faced with

the need to act before two options that are perceived as equally dangerous. Furthermore, Kline *et al.* report that receivers are more ready not to question equivocal responses in situations where they perceive the need for it and do not blame the speaker for the crisis to which he or she is responding (2009: 54).

These observations help us focus on the relation between equivocation and context: that is, the issue of compatibility. Whilst, on first analysis, equivocation can be seen as an instance of indeterminacy, on second analysis, since it responds to practical interests, it can be seen as a very specific case of it. In situations of 'crisis', equivocation is what permits compatibility – if the terms were further clarified and the different persons' meanings further attuned through interpretive charity, some sort of dissonance would arise. This might occur in the form of conflict, but it might also result in a loss of vital interests. Thus, typically, the young police officer from Macao found it too disturbing to identify himself with either one of us (Portuguese/Chinese, husband/wife) at the cost of denying the identification with the other.

Here we get to the issue of consciousness. To what extent was he 'conscious' of what he was doing? To what extent was my wife conscious of her polite response of pretending not to notice whilst secretly signalling to me? How did we both interpret the situation when we spoke of it with humour on our way home that evening? When we reacted to it, immediately at the end of the dinner, we certainly would not have been able to elicit the sort of considerations that I expound upon here. Whilst our mutual training as social scientists provides us with a kind of generalised sensitivity to this sort of situation, and whilst our very presence in the territory was caused by our curiosity concerning matters of ethnicity, I cannot safely retrace what made us register the situation.

The fact remains that I did proceed to write it down in my field notes – so surely I saw in it the budding of some sort of analytical interest. I was attuned to some kind of anthropological relevance even though I only reached the present theoretical formulations at a later point and, in order to do that, I found it necessary to read a lot, debate a lot and learn quite a lot more. The extraordinary thing with these questions is that, myself being a first person participant in the event, I should not be able to provide you with satisfactory answers. We, thus, return to the foundational role of indeterminacy and interpretive charity in the constitution of meaning. These operate in a similar way both when meaning is shared intersubjectively and when it is constituted subjectively.[6]

Let us, then, leave the matter of consciousness undecided, as indeed I believe it should remain (cf. Pina-Cabral and Bestard 2003) – for it must be considered more as a factor in processes of recollection (that is, of active mental re-enactment of a situation) than as a factor in the dynamics of proximate action. I return again to Davidson when he claims that he does not think 'we normally understand what others say by consciously reflecting on the question what they mean, by applying some theory of interpretation, or by summoning up what we take to be the relevant evidence. We do it, much of the time, effortlessly, even automatically. We can do this because we have learned pretty

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6   I recollect a statement concerning time by two clinical psychologists who reach very proximate conclusions when they claim: 'People seem to go far beyond a simple linear Aristotelian–Newtonian conception of time, holding to multiple conceptions and attitudes towards time. Different time conceptions and modes of time experience may be in conflict with each other. Such conflicts may operate on intrapsychic and interpersonal levels or between individuals and the organisations and communities of which they are a part. The ultimate question is how the complex meanings of time, however equivocal they may be, influence behavior' (Lomranz and Shmotkin 1991).

much to talk as others do, and this explains why we generally understand without effort much that they say' (2005: 112).[7] As it would appear, then, this sort of automatic docility applies even to our own thoughts and deeds.

Come what may, in situations of equivocal compatibility, people may not be fully aware that their interlocutors are defining the situation in terms that are contradictory to theirs, but they certainly are not keen to resolve the difference if it threatens their mutual compatibility. As Kline *et al.* (2009) noticed, there is compatibility in the attitude of people that, seeing someone else before a dilemma, are willing to accept forms of equivocal communication as a satisfactory response. Similarly, my wife and I felt for the dilemma in which the young police officer was placed; my wife detected immediately the danger of irrationality but did not press for a resolution.

Worldviews

Now, there are dilemmas that result from simple practical considerations: for example, if I do not yet know why the machines in my factory stopped working, what do I say to the journalist that comes in through the door asking whether there is a problem? Most likely I will respond in equivocal fashion, diverging so as to minimise the possible loss in public confidence resulting from the reporting of the breakdown. This is a simple case, but the example of the young policeman alerts us to a more complex type of situation, where the equivocation is caused by definitions of the context of interaction that are so divergent that they are not subject to resolution.

The prototypical example in the literature, which drives such influential works as Bruce Chatwin's *The songlines* (1987), is what happens when hunter-gatherers meet farmers. Colin Turnbull describes this in his famous book *The forest people*:

> The world of the forest is a closed, possessive world, hostile to all those who do not understand it. At first sight you might think it was hostile to all human beings, because in every village you find the same suspicion and fear of the forest, that blank, impenetrable world. [...] villages are set among plantations in great clearings cut from the heart of the world around them. It is from the plantations that the food comes, not from the forest, and for the villagers life is a constant battle to prevent their plantations from being overgrown.
>   They speak of the world beyond the plantations as being a fearful place, full of malevolent spirits and not fit for anyone to live in except animals and BaMbuti, which is what they call the pigmies. The villagers [...] keep to their plantations and seldom go into the forest unless it is absolutely necessary. For them it is a place of evil. They are outsiders.
>   But the BaMbuti are the real people of the forest. Whereas the other tribes are relatively recent interlopers, the pigmies have been in the forest for many

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7   I find it uncanny that, in many ways, Emmanuel Levinas expresses a similar notion in a totally different philosophical idiom, when he argues that 'En faisant ce que j'ai voulu faire, j'ai fait mille choses que je n'avais pas voulues. [...] Nous sommes ainsi responsables au-delà de nos intentions. [...] Nous avons un doigt pris dans l'engrenage, les choses se retournent contre nous. C'est dire que notre conscience et notre maîtrise de la réalité par la conscience n'épuisent pas notre relation avec elle, que nous y sommes présents par toute l'épaisseur de notre être. Que la conscience de la réalité ne coïncide pas avec notre habitation dans le monde' (1991: 15).

thousands of years. It is their world, and in return for their affection and trust it supplies them with all their needs. (1961: 18–19)

The compatibility between pigmies and villagers that Turnbull explores is based on a form of equivocation that is essential to both groups. If the pigmies were to embrace the villagers' definitions (to 'take them seriously', as it were), they would not be able to carry on with their lives in the forest and vice versa. Since, when they meet, they want to cooperate and be agreeable to each other, they are prone to accept equivocation.

Here we approach a second meaning of the concept of equivocal compatibility, one where people's intersubjective encounters are marked by pulls and bounds that prevent them from taking further the process of interpretive charity. The basic recognition of humanity is usually present, so communication does occur; but the dynamic of approximation that the concept implies (the interpretive charity) is arrested – as the accusation of animality in the above quote typifies. What causes this is something to which Turnbull plainly alludes when he exclaims that 'the BaMbuti are the real people of the forest. Whereas the other tribes are relatively recent interlopers, the pigmies have been in the forest for many thousands of years. It is their world [. . .]'.

We are here before an issue that clearly overtakes the bounds of personal communication: an issue of collective construction of *worldviews* over periods of decades, centuries, millennia. People conform to paths of association between categories, ways of living in the world that have been traced by those who preceded them and, to that extent, formed them as persons. Our readiness to practice interpretive charity and our proneness to travel in the same associational paths as our peers is precisely what, in situations of radical dissonance, makes us unavailable to further approximation.

Beliefs are not self-sufficient units of meaning. Rather, they are necessarily integrated into networks that 'make sense' of these beliefs. As Wittgenstein would have it: 'Only in the stream of thought and life do words have meaning' (quoted in Needham 1985: 25). This is a very similar notion to Davidson's claim that 'Radical incoherence in belief is [. . .] impossible' (2001: 99). This being the case, we cannot be surprised to find that whole areas of belief tend to cohere and that we are prone to 'habits of building belief' (Quine and Ullian 1970: 59). In fact, as Davidson puts it, 'there is a presumption in favour of the truth of a belief that coheres with a significant mass of belief' (2001: 138–9).

To 'make sense', then, is not a characteristic of each belief on its own. Rather, it is a function of the use of beliefs – that is, the way in which beliefs cohere with others within intersubjectively shared worlds. Without having to go to the improbable extreme of claiming that, at any one point in time, a person's beliefs are systematically structured, we are nevertheless plainly justified in looking for the existence of loose concatenations of beliefs. They function as shared grounds for social living. Basically, for the purposes of the comfortable carrying out of everyday life activities and intersubjective engagement, people find it useful to adhere to 'worldviews', i.e. broad patterns of beliefs that are widely shared by their daily social interlocutors.[8]

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8   Cf. Pina-Cabral (1986: 4–5). For a similar suggestion, see Michael Lynch's use of 'worldview' (1998).
    Without entering into his debate with Davidson (pp. 31–54), I think that the latter's insistence that
    there is a limit to the number of beliefs we may attribute to another person that are contrary
    to our own beliefs is not incompatible with the notion that people's beliefs differ: 'we cannot
    intelligibly say that [conceptual] schemes are different, neither can we intelligibly say that they are

Thus, the fixation and the transmission of a belief depend on the way in which it 'makes sense' by relation to a process of sharing of associational paths rooted in a particular sociocultural context. Each belief is simultaneously integrated in the general web of belief of the person in question and in the localised web of belief associated to the domain where it occurs. Moreover, since belief is an intrinsic part of interpersonal communication, its fixation and transmission cannot be dissociated from the communicational context of its occurrence.

Worldviews, therefore, are constellations of belief; they do not exist outside their context of enactment. They are geared to social practice both because they are indispensable for a measure of predictability to occur in social interaction and because they do not exist as formed theories, but as tendencies. They are favoured paths through the web of belief, so to speak. In fact, they have been identified by ethnographers in all areas of socially defined interchange and are characteristically diversified by the constitution of domains of knowledge. Over the years, ethnographers have learnt to describe these forms of patterning as either prototypes or classifications, by using such phrases as 'The X think this or that' or 'The X classify things into this and that', respectively. I work on the assumption that both the ethnographers and their learned anthropological supervisors and readers have found it useful to think in such ways. So the matter cannot be simply discounted. Therefore, we are entitled to conclude that the identification of worldviews (and the prototypes and classifications that constitute them) is indeed a useful way of interpreting people's daily interactions.

I do not presume, however, that people hold such things (worldviews, prototypes and classifications) in their heads, so to speak, as actual images or as pre-formed representations. To the contrary, I am suggesting that the classifications and prototypes that anthropologists have learnt to describe exist statistically (and not mechanically) as tendencies in the way people concatenate belief. These concatenations only exist because they are useful to people in the way they deal with the world and with other people. Thus, worldviews – as paths through the web of belief – are constantly being reinforced by use and respond to the objectified sociocultural world that surrounds all human interaction. They are like jungle paths: they do not pre-exist the process of passage of people that constitutes them and without which they would vanish.

Typically, in Macao, over a period of four and a half centuries two culturally divergent worldviews met without ever coming to merge: the Chinese and the European. For the persons involved, the situation was such that there were immense risks in falling out of the world to which they belonged; both the Chinese Empire and the Catholic Church were heavy handed in their response to subjects that dithered or pretended to play on both camps at the same time. In the seventeenth century, at the height of the Qing Empire and the Inquisition, the brutality of the process was great indeed. Later, during what might be called the British century, the policing of cultural borders was no less severe. But even more recently, if you read Timothy Mo's (1978) novel *The monkey king*, about Hong Kong in the 1970s, you will see that this schism between worldviews continued to carry within it considerable danger and perplexity. In his novel based on the life of Martha Mierop, *City of broken promises*, Austin Coates (1987 [1967]) explores very vividly the way such dilemmas operated in colonial Macao. Once a person changed

one' (Davidson 1984: 198). I fully realise that I am bypassing the thorny issue of differentiating 'concepts' from 'beliefs'.

camp, he or she was protected to a point by the new context, but the space between the two worlds was fraught with immense dangers. I am not suggesting that people were forced to be Chinese or Catholic against their will. To the contrary, I am saying that the process that leads one to accept a socially formed definition of the world – a worldview in the broad sense of the term – is one that we enter into by the very process through which we have access to meaning and become persons.

All I am trying to establish is that in situations such as this one, where different worldviews meet – and they can hardly be considered as rare instances in the history of humanity[9] – subjects often find themselves in situations of compatibility that do not allow for further approximation of meaning. We can think of the myriad examples of situations of commerce, where people were interested in the exchange and in what was exchanged but refused to merge their radically different conceptions of the exchange situation. The history of mercantilism and colonialism is filled with examples of equivocal compatibility of this type.

Borders and stigma

To take the argument one step further, however, we have to consider what happens over time in places like the Congolese villages in Ituri Forest when the pigmies came to visit the villagers; or in cities such as Macao and so many other cities and markets in the world where people with widely divergent worldviews cohabit over long periods of time. Actors learn, as it were, to surf the wave of disagreement. They develop ways of simplifying the situation and expediting their interests. A kind of metaculture arises by means of which people navigate the equivoque. Here the puzzling question of wilful self-deception again rises to the surface.

Over time, a missionary that indoctrinates on a weekly basis his 'bread Christians' surely comes to form some doubts concerning the equivocation; the villagers that received the pigmy servant-visitors surely suspected that they would eventually escape their bondage by returning to the mysterious things they did in the forest! When does the doubt emerge into conscience? Does it ever? But what I want to stress for the sake of the present argument is that equivocal compatibility is something that one might learn to cherish without ever having to resolve it. When that happens, however, the traces of the dilemma do not simply vanish – they continue to operate in silenced ways and they come to affect the very persons who practise the equivocation.

Over time, those who dwell on the border come to be marked by the border: translators, travelling merchants, 'half-castes', missionaries, anthropologists even – such figures of marginality come to suffer the stigma of their condition. We cannot presume that there is no equivocation in their position; that they are all capable of eliciting analytical exegeses of the nature of the difference between the two worldviews that they bridge. The point is that, in a culturally and ethnically divided world, equivocal compatibility has a price and, over time, it becomes itself a source of stigma and personal dilemma. This is, then, a third meaning of the concept, one that can finally help us explain the sense of wounded pride that may lead a person to engage in the sort of 'duplicity' that our young interlocutor risked.

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9 See also Pina-Cabral (1996), where I have explored the relation between marginality and hegemony.

He was on safe ground with us, as it happens, and I am almost certain that he felt that. But he might not have been and he might have encountered prejudice; such prejudice as he will easily meet with in the streets of Hong Kong and Macao for being a Eurasian, in spite of the fact that we live today in a globalised and tolerant age.

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In drawing this essay to a close, I would like to emphasise that the notion of equivocal compatibility is here offered as an analytical tool for dealing with interactions of a specifiable type, which are, nevertheless, part of much more general processes. In the course of intersubjective interaction, a creative process occurs of successive transformations of the pertinent angles of identification and differentiation. This is what we saw at work in our example, where we witnessed a manipulation of the first person plural. The use of pronouns is a constant mode of producing and altering identification and differentiation in such a way that what is singular and what is plural is constantly being re-assessed.[10] This dynamism of plurals both elicits response from the persons involved in the interaction and marks the world that surrounds them (and here I include also people's memory). Ultimately, it is these marks that constitute the bounds of social identity.

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10   In fact, in Mandarin, but not in Cantonese, much as in many African languages, there is more than one type of first person plural (including or excluding the immediate interlocutor). This, however, did not apply in the instance related here. I thank Ramon Sarró for calling my attention to this.

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