

| Theme |



Preface: Cultivating uncertainty

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Instead of contrasting various situations according to their degree of uneasiness, we might better ask of the most peaceful and secure what steps would be necessary to transform it into something that was deeply unsettling.

Erving Goffman, *Relations in public*, 1971

This themed section explores situations of interactional uncertainty, namely contexts in which the grounds of an interaction cannot be taken for granted. How to be sure, for instance, that a barbed comment is only intended to tease and is not really meant to be offensive? In the same vein, how are we to deal with “white lies” and other strategic dissimulations in flirtatious relationships? And how can we ever be sure that a benign handshake does not in fact hide malevolent intentions? These are some of the issues the contributors address in this volume.

All the essays gathered here deal with opaque situations that generate uncertainty from the participants’ points of view. Starting with a minimal working characterization of interactional uncertainty—viz. situations in which (at least some) participants cannot but wonder as to the nature of their collective action—we deliberately choose not to address questions of definition, be they emic or etic. Rather, in a more experimental manner, we explore diverse—or even heterogeneous—kinds of opacities and uncertainties in a wide array of social situations and cultural environments. Opacity itself (considered as a formal property of some contexts) may proceed from various causes, such as inscrutable intentions, strategic dissimulation, double binds, or critical knowledge-gaps between participants. As to their effects, situations of uncertainty can give rise to a

wide range of emotional reactions, ranging from minor discomfort or embarrassment to feelings of anxiety or insecurity. Although highly diverse, these essays nevertheless converge around two points. First, several authors show that interactional uncertainty is not always reducible to accidental misunderstandings, but can also be a constitutive or “built-in” element of various social settings. Second, many contributions refuse to consider uncertainty exclusively as a problem to be faced and solved. They show not only how social agents navigate through opaque interactions, but also how they deal with opacity as a social resource enabling them to negotiate or even create relationships. In brief, they stress the productivity of uncertainty at the heart of human sociality.

Outline of a microsociology of uncertainty

From a methodological point of view, we share a commitment to shedding light on situations of uncertainty through detailed ethnographies of specific situations, adopting a quasi-microscopic lens of description. Therefore, our approach may be called “pragmatic,” insofar as all the contributors resort to fine-grained analyses of contexts of interaction and communication (Severi and Bonhomme 2009). It is undoubtedly within the subfield of (mostly American) linguistic anthropology that pragmatics has established its pedigree within our discipline (e.g., Silverstein 1976; Hanks 1996; Duranti 2004), drawing on philosophers of language such as Peirce (1955), Austin (1962) and Grice (1989). Two recent contributions to this field are of special relevance to our theme. In an inspiring article about Mayan shamanism, William Hanks (2006b) carefully analyzes the orchestration of verbal and nonverbal communication involved in divinatory sessions. He convincingly argues that, in some situations, participants may achieve common ground through (and not despite) mutual opacity and significant knowledge-gaps. From another perspective, a collection of essays edited by Alan Rumsey and Joel Robbins (2008) examines native doctrines about the opacity of other minds in Pacific societies. In order to address the issue of the inscrutability of intentions, they focus on the epistemic and moral dimensions of the indigenous language ideologies that regulate the everyday use of language.

While we undoubtedly build on these approaches, we nonetheless do not focus primarily on speech, language ideologies, or folk theories, but rather investigate the interactional dimensions of opacity and uncertainty. Although linguistic anthropologists regard speech as a form of social action *per se*, they study the articulation between language, culture, and society by means of an analytical toolkit, mainly adapted from linguistic concepts. In contrast, we draw not only on linguistic anthropology but also on interactionist sociology, a tradition that passes from Simmel to Goffman all the way through the Chicago school. By exporting analytical tools elaborated within the field of urban studies (and usually confined to Western settings) to a wide range of locales and situations, we aim to de-exoticize the anthropological study of such classic topics as ritual, witchcraft, joking relationships, and so on.

One of the most effective tools developed by interactionist approaches is the concept of the *frame*, introduced by Gregory Bateson (1972) and consequently developed by Erving Goffman (1974). Frames refer, first and foremost, to cognitive resources mobilized by actors to stabilize their interactions and agree on the nature of their collective action. However, in *Frame analysis* (1974: 10, 83), Goffman

himself insists that frames are exposed to “transformational vulnerability,” through operations of keying (transforming an activity into something else—as in make-believe) and fabrication (the manipulative use of keying by one of the participants at the expense of others—as with scams). The excerpt from Goffman’s *Relations in public* (1971: 383) we chose as the epigraph to this preface highlights the unsettling potential of such transformations. Even more radically, Goffman considers situations in which the cumulative layering of keying operations brings about structural undecidability to such an extent that nobody can trust anybody else. He gives the example of exposed double agents to illustrate this kind of interactional complexity, but mocking and hazing offer other good examples of this.

This focus on moments of uncertainty echoes recent developments in French pragmatic sociology. In his latest works, Luc Boltanski (2011, 2012) has questioned the Durkheimian premises of Goffman’s microsociology but also of ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1967), challenging their optimistic stress on actors’ abilities to manage social adjustments and repair breaches in the normative order of interaction:

The main contribution of the pragmatic standpoint to sociology has been to underline the uncertainty that threatens social arrangements and hence the fragility of reality. But it stops half-way when it places too much confidence in the ability of actors to reduce this uncertainty. (Boltanski 2011: 54)

Taking seriously the phenomenological background of “radical uncertainty” against which reality is socially constructed, Boltanski puts the stress on moments where uncertainty re-surfaces as an inescapable issue that social actors must confront, as opposed to everyday routine in which actors tacitly disregard misconduct and misunderstandings.

While arguing for the continued relevance of frame analysis and paying special attention to the interplay of everyday “getting-by” or “making-do,” and moments of uncertainty, we nevertheless diverge from these authors on two points. First, unlike Boltanski, we do not assume uncertainty to be a given—i.e., the background against which reality is constructed—but rather as an emergent product of specific interactional dynamics. Second, unlike Goffman and most of microsociology, we do not necessarily equate the occasional surfacing of uncertainty with a breach of the Durkheimian social order. Admittedly, some contributions elaborate on the dysphoric effects of misframing, be they errors of conduct—“false notes” as Goffman (1953) called them—or ambiguities of interpretation. However, other contributions consider more constitutive forms of uncertainty (i.e., settings which not only allow for discomfort or anxiety, but which are really predicated on opacity). Thus, we propose to explore the manifold ways uncertainty might surface within or between interactional frames.

Negotiating relations through uncertainty: From ceremonial settings to everyday affairs

The first two contributions to our themed section take ritualized behavior as their main topic of investigation. Indeed, ritualized behavior has often been seen as an *experimentum crucis* for the investigation of the interactional grounds of human sociality. In ritual contexts, participants can no longer rely on the ordinary

assumptions that regulate everyday interactions: for instance, ritual action can entail an opacification of their own intentionality by participants (Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994), or a paradoxical condensation of conflicting modes of relationship (Houseman and Severi 1998). Opacity or equivocality thus appears as a direct outcome of rituals' constitutive rules, rather than as a mere failure of performance.¹ Building on these research trends, Laurent Gabail describes in his contribution the relational architecture of Bassari male initiation rituals in Guinea. The initiatory transformation produces new agents—sometimes called “odd fellows”—that are characterized by their complex identity and associated with supernatural beings. The originality of Gabail's essay is to carefully analyze the opaque interactions through which this new identity is ritually staged (e.g., masked performances or the even more unsettling behavior of ritual clowns). These clowns systematically engage in disturbing interactions with women and children. Thus, while the former playfully partake in the situation, the latter are much more ambivalent about the significance of the clowns' behavior.

In his contribution, Emmanuel de Vienne explores yet another form of ritualized behavior: he revisits the classical concept of joking relationships through an original analysis of teasing and taunting among the Trumai Indians of Brazil. In his seminal “Theory of play and fantasy,” Bateson (1972) showed that play activities involve an implicit meta-communicative message—“This is play”—that establishes a paradoxical frame comparable to Epimenides' paradox of self-reference.² Bateson notes in passing that there exists an even more complex form of play, which is constructed not upon the premise “This is play” but rather around the question “Is this play?”³ Establishing such a paradoxical and undecidable frame is precisely what is at stake in Trumai jokes: what is funny, de Vienne tells us, is to play around with the question of whether or not the participants are indeed joking. As a matter of fact, the best jokes maintain this ambiguity and, as a consequence, leave the victim in a perplexed state between laughter and embarrassment. Thus, though these jokes occur in the course of daily interactions and not within bounded ceremonial settings, their uncertainty does not proceed from fortuitous misunderstanding, but is built into the interactional frame of joking relationships. Moreover, the uncertainty of joking proves to be a powerful social resource, particularly in the production and cultivation of open-ended relationships (typically between male cross-cousins among the Trumai).

The latter insight brings to the fore another issue, which has less to do with the premises of uncertainty than with its uses: what about the *productivity* of uncertainty in the conduct of social relationships? From this perspective, the volume makes a point of not limiting itself to ritualized behavior and also explores comparable situations that emerge within the give-and-take of everyday life. From this perspective, the next contribution, by Matthew Carey, can be seen as the tipping point of this volume, as it underscores the generative potential of uncertainty in open-ended relationships. His case study of a flirtatious affair in Morocco highlights how opacity, far from hindering relations, may help create and

1. On constitutive rules, see Searle (1969).

2. Epimenides, himself a Cretan, reportedly stated that “all Cretans are liars.”

3. On this topic, see also Houseman (2001).

sustain them. Reversing the relationship between context and uncertainty, he shows how uncertainty (in this case, about the lovers' respective intentions) creates the possibility of interaction and generates its own interstitial context, rather than being generated by it. Dissimulation, deception, postponed dates, false pretexts, and the like, are efficient ways of navigating and prolonging relationships, while escaping the alternative between marriage and stigmatization. In sum, cultivating doubt provides a temporary niche for lovers in the face of overly constraining social norms. When uncertainty is no longer sustainable, the relationship abruptly ends. Furthermore, Carey points out that cultivating random connections and maintaining uncertainty as long as possible prove to be effective techniques not only in flirting, but also in job-hunting. By exploring similarities between interactional strategies used across various social ventures, Carey helps us deal with a notorious pitfall of microsociology, namely its quasi-definitional confinement within single, even isolated situations.

Modernity, occult agents, and interactional insecurity

In their contributions, Julien Bonhomme and Olivier Allard address another pitfall of microsociological analysis: the critical issue of scales. Such a method, it has been argued, misses the broader "social" context, which shapes and determines local situations (Bourdieu 1991). In an effort to overcome the paralyzing polarization between micro and macro scales of analysis, Hanks (2006a) has proposed to re-conceptualize the notion of context by highlighting the layered "embedding" of multiple levels of analysis, from situations of mere co-presence to meaningful settings and socio-historical fields. Bonhomme and Allard suggest another way out of the micro/macro dichotomy by investigating various social contexts often regarded as typical of "modernity"—the macrosociological concept *par excellence*.

Contriving an unlikely ménage-à-trois between Goffman and the Comaroffs, Bonhomme shows how the wide-ranging dynamics of modernity affect the minutiae of human interaction. He analyzes a series of disquieting African rumors of transnational scope (stories of penis snatching, of killer mobile phone numbers, of deadly alms) by pinpointing the specific interactional repertoires in which they are grounded. He captures the "global" dimension of these rumors through a microscopic lens of analysis—thus dissociating the twin opposition micro vs. macro and local vs. global. These new forms of the occult focus on the dangers of modern anonymity in two different situations: (1) face-to-face encounters with strangers in urban settings, and (2) mediated interactions with distant and often invisible agents through technological devices. Therefore, the anxiety elicited by these rumors is a matter of interactional insecurity, namely the risk of being forced into opaque interactions with unknown others.

In his essay, Allard considers yet another modern repertoire of mediated interactions fraught with uncertainty: the dealings of Warao Indians with the Venezuelan administration through written documents. For the Warao, official papers may be endowed with a kind of magical power, especially when writing one's name and ID number—a list of which is said to automatically generate a flow of wealth from the government. However, the hopes invested in these opaque transactions are suffused with deep anxieties associated with the asymmetrical position of the Warao vis-à-vis State bureaucracies (the latest extension of a long history of patronage relationships). Allard stresses the emotional ambivalence

characteristic of double-or-nothing situations in which the stakes are high and the outcome uncertain. He further shows that interactional insecurity may derive from the virtual presence of actors whose very identity remains uncertain: to whom are the Warao sending their applications? The local politician? President Chávez himself? Or the anonymous State?

Thus, modernity seems to be characterized by a proliferation of impersonal actors and broader forces, whose spectral presence directly manifests itself in the interactional setting. The authors take into account these occult entities not as abstract dimensions of a broader social context but as true protagonists, part and parcel of the interaction. The irruption of a magical State, of spirits, or of witches are, more than anything else, a factor of disruption in the course of people's everyday life. Occult agents impose a redefinition, a rescaling, or a "keying" to borrow Goffman's notion, of previous modes of interaction. A penis snatcher alert, for example, does indeed suspend the ordinary and stable script of interpersonal relations, thereby creating a climate of paranoid anxiety that will only end when the rumor finally dissipates.

Uncertain adjustments in interspecific relationships

The last two contributions consider yet another kind of unsettling interaction: relations between humans and animals, which obviously entail a radical gap between the protagonists' heterogeneous interactional abilities. In such circumstances, the very possibility of cooperation and communication is at stake. Nevertheless, Charles Stépanoff, Stéphane Rennesson, Emmanuel Grimaud, and Nicolas Césard show that, though always uncertain, interspecific coadjustment can be achieved. Treating these human-animal relationships less as ontological schemes than as situated interactions—both rich and troubling—allows them to propose new perspectives on sociality. Animals are therefore also taken seriously as partners of interactions, however problematic these may be in practice.

In his study of reindeer herding system among the Tozhu of Siberia, Stépanoff engages in innovative ways with recent research on social cognition. While Stephen Levinson (2006) has put forward the concept of a "human interaction engine" to account for the "distinctive pan-specific pattern for interaction with *con-specifics*" (2006: 42, emphasis added), Stépanoff's contribution asks how this engine might work within the frame of *interspecific* interactions. Through a fine-grained analysis that takes into account the reindeer's abilities and interests, thus building as much on ethology as ethnography, he puts Herbert Clark's (2006) concept of "joint commitment" to the test of radically asymmetrical interactions between the animals and their herders. In order to bypass the issue of shared intentionality between the protagonists, he proposes to understand these interactions as *induced* rather than as a *joint* commitment, drawing on a concept developed by Hanks (2006b).⁴ He thus leaves open the question of whether these fragile interactions, decidedly social, could be cast in terms of "cooperation."

In their contribution on beetle fighting games in Thailand, Rennesson, Grimaud, and Césard radicalize these issues, insofar as they consider interactions

4. According to Hanks, "induced commitment" refers to situations (such as divination rituals) in which one of the protagonists is induced to cooperate, without being able to fully understand what is going on.

between insects and humans. In this case, the overlapping of the protagonists' *Umwelten* (lived environments) is tenuous to the point of being questionable. In contrast with Clifford Geertz's famous description of the Balinese cockfight as "a dramatization of status concerns" and a metaphor of the wider Balinese "temper" (1973), the authors choose to focus instead on the minute practicalities of interactions between a player and his beetle. What is at stake for the players, as well as for the authors themselves, is the very nature of the connections the former try to establish with the insects: for instance, nobody is quite clear about what kinds of effects—physiological or otherwise—a vibrating stylus and bell attached to the beetle might have on the insect. Resisting the temptation to reduce these interactions to a crude and mechanical stimuli-response control, Rennesson, Grimaud, and Césard rather propose to cast them in terms of an enlarged conception of communication, which would not be predicated on intentional signals and thus tentatively could include insects as well as humans.

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In conclusion, we believe these essays will help renew anthropological understandings of social interaction by bringing interactionist approaches back to the front of the anthropological scene.⁵ These ethnographic explorations both enlarge and de-compartmentalize the classical framework of interactionism. On the one hand, they take seriously non-standard protagonists (such as spirits, witches, animals, or impersonal entities—to which, following Vidal [2007] and Latour [2012], we could have added robots and, more generally speaking, technical objects) as true partners of interaction. On the other hand, they overcome the insularity of interactional situations by navigating across heterogeneous contexts and multiple scales. Moreover, this themed section's focus on situations of uncertainty proceeds from a heuristic choice to dispense with the Durkheimian premises of interactionism, which has unduly privileged order and stability in social life.

Nevertheless, our purpose is not to argue that the discipline should replace its continuing analytical focus on social order and stability with a romantic celebration of creative instability—already an overused trope within post-structuralist and post-modernist anthropological discourse. This collection of essays does not herald any social ontology that would place uncertainty at its heart. In fact, we are not so much interested in putting the stress on indigenous cosmologies—be they based on native concepts of order or disorder, stability or instability—as much as in pinpointing actual situations (or even sometimes single events) in which uncertainty locally emerges as a shared concern for partners in an interaction. Our emphasis on the variety of contexts is precisely meant to avoid the flattening effect created by unduly abstracting systems of representations, such as indigenous cosmologies. From this perspective, uncertainty does not appear as an ontological quality of the social world, nor as a psychological state of individuals, but rather as an emergent property of the interactional dynamics in which the participants are necessarily caught.

5. See also Enfield and Levinson (2006) for a similar undertaking within the field of social cognition.

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