

Terms of engagement

Anthropology is nothing if it is not a particular way of describing the world. Yet what is most precious to it – the terms and concepts that mark it as a discipline – can also be the most tricky. When resurgent boundaries and exclusions twist truth telling and faking in any which way, anthropology might find a new urgency in thinking about the conceptual life it tries to express. How it engages has always depended on (attention to) how terms are used, something shared with those who people its subject matter. Critical attention has never been more important. An exploration into the colourings and resonances of diverse verbal usages, old and new, points to moments where language works both with us and against us. Indeed supports for xenophobia and the like may be embedded where least expected. Out of it all, the lecture imagines a future for anthropological exposition. There could be no better place to start than in EASA's many-langued company.

Key words Conditions of enquiry, fraud, xenophobia, language use, relations

Understanding that not all relations, and not all separations, are the same is going to be crucial over the next few years. (Green 2017: 531)

10 April 2020. The event by itself seemed nothing: a BBC programme, 'on the frontline of the medical and scientific fightback', about Covid-19. Descriptions of the virus, with eye-watering visuals, accompanied a narrative of possible links – to wildlife markets, city-size bat populations and viral mutation encouraged by intensive farming. It then switched to statistics of reproduction speed-up. Only fleetingly mentioned was how different countries acted, that presumably not being part of the science, although it was surely part of the pandemic (Latour 2020: 2). It was, however, noted that South Korea, prepared by SARS, was relying on mass testing. It is illuminating looking back: the programme referred to tests several times, planting the suspicion that the UK's restricted testing was only recording 5–10% of cases. Some medical scientists have been less reticent in saying that the Westminster government was not learning from experience elsewhere.

On the news the very next morning that government, in the ministerial person of the Secretary of State for Health, in effect boasted just that. Hancock was quizzed about the British Medical Association stating once again that they did not have enough personal protective equipment (PPE). The biggest death toll so far was also announced. He was pressed for some admission of responsibility. The interviewer was stark: lives have been unnecessarily lost. Hancock freely admitted that his ministerial brief was to look after people's lives. Yet he then, repeatedly, asserted variations of 'We must take it from where we are at now'. Where they were at now was not just the farce over equipment, but acting against WHO advice on mass testing. And in this absurd affair of PPE, Hancock explicitly said that we should grasp matters as they are now and *not* dwell on what is past. Yet the line between premature accountability and learning from previous actions is a fine one; an acknowledgement of past problems would at least signal that there was something to learn. 'Let's take it from here': nothing to learn.

From the balconies

All Europe was in lockdown, but many must have heard that first glorious moment when the balconies of Milan spilled over with music. Lockdown music had already become a genre when a colleague in Leiden sent me a zoomed performance from the Rotterdam Philharmonic. On 11 April, the news also played a short piece from two musical families who happened to be next-door neighbours in Cardiff, hailing from the BBC National Orchestra of Wales, the Chamber Orchestra of Europe, the Irish Chamber Orchestra and the Welsh National Opera. The European music makers acted out their constrained circumstances, neither denying nor overcoming the restrictions but showing what was possible. Theirs was a critical intervention, an address to the conditions or terms of lockdown. And they incidentally demonstrated the power of learning, new and old. Their houses had back gardens, running between them a fence with a hole. The hole enabled the Cardiff players to adapt their rehearsal, to keep distance while also hearing one another, enabling them to draw on diverse disciplines of musical performance. Giving this lecture online felt, on the occasion, like talking through a fence. I wanted to draw on the diversity of social anthropology, and address an aspect of the discipline in its own terms without feeling that its cumulative expertise was rendered irrelevant by current events, any more than applied to the musicians.

Those two media episodes: relating them adds a dimension to each. Hardly unusual – it is the kind of relation everyone makes all the time in joining up bits of a universe that might otherwise seem disparate. This is of course how the ‘science’ was portrayed, linking a virus leaping across species to animal-rearing practices that speed up viral reproduction. And separation being a relation from another point of view, an anthropologist would say, what was medical and scientific about such knowledge was separated from other issues, just as the Minister separated himself from an immediate past. That said, the suspicion about testing made suspicious in turn the Minister’s insistence that everything possible was being done. One commentator (Matharu 2020) on those UK governmental Coronavirus briefings borrowed a Russian anthropologist’s (Yurchak 2005) term for fake normality, ‘hypernormalisation’: they’re lying, we know they’re lying, and they know that we know they’re lying.

Whether to link or separate, making relations is the stuff of criticism; it is equally the stuff of suspicion, and suspicion rebounds on those who are suspicious. For as much as relations reveal what is not immediately apparent, pointing to externalities or unaccounted implications and thereby extending questions about responsibility, they are also hazardous. Writers and thinkers beware! For making relations is, more generally, central to how writers and thinkers expound things.

There is no guarantee that simply because they are made relations will be either truthful or helpful, but in the English language, at least, they are essential to exposition. Exposition implies getting a reader or listener to understand, and the relations being drawn help form what is explained or analysed, how it is argued and what is omitted. For any anthropologist the issue is as routine as it is for a TV programmer or a minister on the defensive. Practices of exposition are normally open to academic argument; through those familiar categories, description, analysis and theory, anthropologists both operationalise and contest one another’s languages. At the same time, exposition is all of these and something else. It will also be drawing on assumptions, colourings, connotations, sentiments, dogmas, and so forth, patchily applicable or idiosyncratically heard, which may work their rhetorical effects unseen. Completely unsurprising. But

it means that here, too, the terms on which anthropologists engage with their materials can sometimes work as much against their intentions as with them. It is interesting to think about this particular hazard in a multi-lingual company.

Anthropology is nothing if it is not a particular way of describing the world. Especially when resurgent boundaries and exclusions twist truth telling any which way, there is good reason to be thinking about its habits of exposition. The issue weaves in and out of what we might make of engagement and then again of what we might make of its terms.

ENGAGEMENT: grounds, conditions, rules

The conditions and rules in terms of which people deal with one another, or with what they imagine as their world, contribute at their most general to the grounds of engagement. Engagement is an ever-present preoccupation for anthropology. Indeed, insofar as anthropologists are inevitably grounded at some point in someone's 'real world', they have a collective concern with respect to one another's interlocutors. Thus, despite innumerable controversies and contestations, an unspoken rule of thumb is the fallback courtesy – at least until argued otherwise – of respecting colleagues' 'ethnographic' reporting. For the anthropologist, this grounding position of trust does not just apply to ethnographers' methods and motivations but entails a suspension of disbelief in whatever real world ethnographers find themselves in. Additionally, and beyond modes of analysis and theory more readily open to critical scrutiny, trust is also put in disciplinary modes of exposition.

Where so much rests on a condition of initial trust, it will matter what wider currency 'trust' has. After all, trust from one perspective may seem collusion from another, and widespread and taken-for-granted conditions of anthropological knowledge-making can fall under suspicion. Decolonising the curriculum makes the case. Insofar as the call to decolonise anthropology-as-usual reappraises what is important, for and by whom, it must mistrust some terms of engagement in order to underline and urge trust in others.¹

Taken alone, the phrase 'terms of engagement' often has a ring of mutuality to it. It may carry the assumption of an agreement as to what rules prevail, as in contracts or military protocols. Yet rules and conditions diverge: the rules of a game (say) will be different from the conditions of play. Parties seemingly subject to conditions beyond their control may still engage one another according to their own rules. Indeed it is a moot point as to the kind of agreement that might be involved when ethnographers talk of engagement with interlocutors. Procedures for obtaining consent, for instance, variously serve as institutional insurance, as making a deal, or as tokens of more encompassing respect. In any event, where people are concerned, trust – or otherwise – will be subject to the unfolding unpredictability of relations.

ENGAGEMENT: faking it

From forced migration to gender inequality to climate change, an agreement of sorts among the discipline's practitioners supposes that anthropology is fit to embrace

¹ In retrospect I am struck by the imperial tenor of (certain) Anglophone understandings of relations, the subject of the second half of the lecture. The phrase *terra nullius* (land open to occupation/colonisation, hereby making relations) is a gesture towards this.

current events and public issues. In late 2016, chance synchronised two overviews of such engagement, one of them explicitly labelled thus.

The first deployed a well-trying mode of academic deliberation to address faking in the post-truth era. A workshop held in Germany laid the grounds for a collection of essays on the anthropology of defrauding and faking, published in this (EASA's) journal (Beek et al. 2019). Through materials from largely African countries, the essays set out a comparative agenda of general theoretical interest. *Social Anthropology's* editors observed both the worldwide antiquity and the novelty of the theme. Trickery and defrauding were hardly new, yet there was something new about their worldwide reach: the cases were invariably transnational. They began with a news media story of a fake US embassy in Ghana selling forged visas, and then a further story that the first story was fake – no such scam existed. Amid speculations as to who fabricated it, Beek et al. observed that the 'multi-layeredness of this story exemplified the loss of authenticity of – and deterioration of trust in – institutions and symbols that once seemed reliable' (2019: 425). Calling something fraud or fake had become a shortcut term for uncertainties of all kinds. If the Ghanaian non-scam seemingly spread deliberate confusion, it was also spreading generalised mistrust.

Engagement with contemporary concerns stimulated another kind of engagement, namely with the ethnographic enterprise. Evident once said, the specific situations evinced the extent to which, in the interests of fraud, trust is at once exploited and regenerated. This the convenors took as their object of enquiry: 'studying defrauding and faking is necessarily also a study about authenticating, about practices that produce the very underlying distinctions of the genuine and the fraudulent' (Beek et al. 2019: 427). Hence, fake money-making schemes are not aberrations but routine phases in the business cycles of capitalist economies. Bürge described a Sierra Leonean money-doubler, with acute skills of social observation, whose stunning performance 'brought me to the brink [but not further] of believing and entrusting him money' (2019: 461). For all the ethnographer's readiness to enter into the rules of the game, the respective conditions under which money circulated – degrees of material hardship – separated him from the trickster and the trickster's usual clients.

About the same time, another mobilisation of anthropological engagement was afoot. The *American Anthropologist* was seeking quick, turn-around commentaries on 'What anthropologists do and have done', in this case about 'Nativism, nationalism and xenophobia' (Dominguez and Metzner 2017). The request was phrased in terms of how anthropologists resist or otherwise respond to protectionist movements as regimes under which they live. Identifying such regimes as racist, xenophobic or nationalist was one thing; contributors were asked what they judged crucial in their conduct of an anthropological life. With which audiences might they effectively engage? For a further question raised its head when scholarship itself – regardless of content – fell under suspicion. A remark made of India (Ganguly 2017: 527) could have been of anywhere: 'right-wing nationalism ... is highly suspicious of intellectual pursuits in general'. Aside from academic censorship and the suppression of criticism, other unspoken terms of engagement swing into view when it is the very apparatus of argument (evidence, analysis) that is regarded with enmity. Epistemology remains after all one of the scholar's principal tools.

Buchowski (2017: 521) pointed to invented stories about Europe suffering under immigration as mobilising a 'postfact' paradigm of public rhetoric. Political regimes flourishing on disinformation is nothing new. Yet what of fake and fraud when utterances can be equally propagated or dismissed as intent to deceive? A seemingly widespread

imputation is that interests (personal, material) drive everything. For some UK parliamentarians lying does not matter when everyone is suspected of acting out of partisan and/or personal interest. If those who make up fake stories are like those who dismiss stories as fake, lies are everywhere and only interests are grounded. So if you are not being asked to trust the speaker, trust is *not* being regenerated. Trust is not even required. A lie does its work if it simply disrupts other interests in promoting one's own.

This second collection focused on personal and professional dangers facing anthropologists worldwide (Dominguez and Metzner 2017: 519). Contributors highlighted an erosion of what we might call safe spaces for anthropological work in the precarity of educational and research institutions. Instead, widespread mistrust of institutions (they all have 'vested interests') has led to de-activation or – as in the case of the Brazilian National Indian Foundation (FUNAI) (Rial and Grossi 2017) – perversion, and thus the attrition of milieux providing locales of learning and criticism. One might reflect on the conditions of engagement of anthropologists' own institutions, such as EASA and the AAA, themselves conditional on safe places for meeting and publishing. There was a moment when, prompted by open xenophobia, and with EASA and AAA in support, 25 educational bodies mounted a special convention of Polish ethnologists and anthropologists, who thereby were able to 'swim against the current' (Buchowski 2017). While the resulting manifesto was never enough by itself, some things simply had to be said. Perelman, reflecting on the Argentinian Association of University Graduates in Anthropology, wrote of institutes and departments, through research as well as public action, 'constantly working against the growth of repressive politics and actions ... [including] xenophobia, and persecution' (2017: 533, 534).

Anthropological associations are but tiny signs of the precariousness of institutions of all kinds, including administrative organs of government or parliamentary protocol. Often put in their place is the 'voice' or 'will' of the people (Buchowski 2017: 521; Weale 2018), a rhetoric that flourishes in situations of generalised mistrust.

ENGAGEMENT: mistrust, intervention

For all the qualifications colleagues might wish to bring to anthropologists' trust of the ethnographer, professional trust was shaped by the European Enlightenment, and in matters of scholarship by the scientific revolution so-called. Trust the method. Insofar as techniques of verification and proof were built into the instruments of investigation, terms of engagement were taken out of practitioners' hands. Left in practitioners' hands remained the credibility of the social person, latterly expressed in terms of professional qualification and publication profile. Specialised forms of scholarly mistrust came to flourish alongside. They included scientific doubt, the professional ignorance that spurs further efforts to study, as well as critical discourses of all kinds. Critical scholarship is often ameliorative in intent, though in form may be indistinguishable from venomous or mindless attack. Everything rests, indeed, on the terms of engagement, on the way writer and reader (*say*) meet in the text in question.

Think of the ethnographer investigating money scams whose trust [my term] of his own senses was thrown awry by a clever defrauding scheme. For a certain kind of modern subject trust is a default position, distinguishing some relations from others (friend from enemy), or if there is little trust in persons ('all politicians are liars') being invested in instituted systems through reliance on the conventions of, say, local

government or banking. Of course, institutionalisation finds its critics too. Frequently voiced is criticism of bureaucratic detail or regimes of accountability, including regulations to beat mistrust. In the social sciences, building the avoidance of mistrust into accountability protocols creates fresh arenas of suspicion, this time of measurements and indicators.² Rather than using trust to deceive someone, as the money-doubler duped the unwary, educational auditors seemingly generate generalised mistrust as grounds for combating threats to their system; we may well ask who is deceiving whom.

Suppose trust were not a default position. This is an argument made of the High Atlas of Morocco, where, as it happens, certain apparently key practices nonetheless did not work as institutions.³ Among men, friendship was not predicated on trust: the terms of engagement were instrumentalism and interest. Axiomatically, ‘everybody without exception is untrustworthy’ (Carey 2017: 79). One consequence was that men lied without intending to deceive: plausible falsehoods deceived no-one. In this respect, Carey observed, the situation resembled the kind of pre-commercial society imagined in the Scottish Enlightenment, before anonymous self-interest in the market place became separated from disinterest among friends. Backing off from coercion, as they back off from speculating about the minds of others, if these men of the Atlas valued autonomy and egalitarianism it was as a contingent *realpolitik*, not as an ideological project.

Pitfalls awaited the fieldworker who hoped to build relations of trust. Carey’s own participation had been sought in the local currency of friendship (affording assistance, doing favours, contributing to enterprises), an example of anthropological engagement that was insofar as it could be non-interventionist. Ideologically active interlocutors, on the other hand, sometimes prompt activist responses on the investigator’s part, and thus interventions aligned with theirs, but it does not necessarily follow. Green’s (1997) fieldwork in 1980s London was a pioneering study of activism; feminists’ battles over gender, sexuality and identity were, among other things, over the kinds of communities that might be true to their situation. However, her own position as to what counts as intervention in anthropological terms has been addressed to ‘engagement within the world of which anthropology is a part – not so much in terms of the activism of particular anthropologists, but more in terms of the political implications of different ways of thinking anthropologically’ (Green 2014: 2; and see Eriksen 2019: 28). There is an interesting twist to this.

From millenarianism onwards, social experiments have captured the anthropological imagination. An instance from Spain nods towards the popular assemblies that flourished there in the wake of the Spanish Occupy movement of 2011–12 (Corsín Jiménez and Estalella 2017). By contrast with the High Atlas, that environment was strongly institutionalised, and activism invariably involved counter-institutionalisation, manifest in how people set up meetings, rearranged urban spaces, and so forth. Appropriate social forms could indeed be apprehended ideologically, and carried forward with lives of their own. – Well tried questions about ‘distributed authority’ and ‘consent-based decision making’, concepts familiar enough then, today inform explicit rules of

² Biagioli and Lippman (2020) describe new modes of academic fraud generated by impact metrics.

³ Carey (2017: 69–70) suggests they lack the tension between (abstract) constitutive rules and their (organisational) instantiation that is the signature of institutions – Yarrow (2017) dwells on just such a tension in a Scottish local government context.

engagement for climate activists in, for example, Extinction Rebellion. – The Spanish experiment in question belonged to that ‘same culture of activism’ (Sansi 2015: 159), and was articulated *as* intervention. While revealing interests at stake is a powerful weapon in the arsenal of critics, activists would be nothing without their own interests. To the contrary, intervention is bound to be an enactment of them.

Thus did a set of artists in Barcelona participate in an ethnographic study at a moment when they were defining their own work as participative (‘social practice’ art, devolved from earlier moments of performative or relational art). Ignoring divisions between artist and non-artist, they acted out political projects that would transform people’s senses of the social. The artists made things happen – produced events, created unprecedented associations – the object being a social configuration such as ‘commerce’ or ‘community’. Such artists offered a form of work, Sansi observed, that might help anthropologists think about theirs, including their collaborative practices. If it had long been articulated as a term-of-engagement desideratum, how collaboration gets finessed remained open to experimental appropriation. ‘[A]nthropologists may learn about anthropology precisely from the way that artists have *appropriated* it’ (2015: 137; my emphasis). Those who defined their calling as social practice art, working in public places and on specific sites, included in their modes of engagement (‘frame of reference’) social and cultural theory, ‘and anthropology in particular’ (2015: 2). This is the twist. They were not just ‘like’ anthropologists: some had university degrees in the subject. As for appropriation, and one might be grateful for it, anthropology outside the academy takes its own forms.

The way scholars look to their practices of thought is also a way of looking after them. Conversely, if taking care of their conceptualisations is among anthropologists’ terms of academic engagement with one another (after Rabinow 2020), so surely is interest in how the concepts they use are used in other locations.

Renewal

The narrative has moved across many locales. Innumerable circumstances invite us to think about the understandings that allow anthropologists to work at all, patterns of trust or mistrust implied. Indeed, trust and mistrust can adhere to the very words and terms they deploy.

As a term of analysis, ‘engagement’ may seem suspiciously benign or then again can acquire acute negativity. While engaged anthropology, along with action or public anthropology, is championed for its ethics, it is also criticised for the interests it inevitably voices in defence of certain social formations.⁴ Anthropologists are not simply prey to the endlessly changing connotations of particular words: there are scholarly arguments to be made about concepts, such as those advanced by advocates of the epistemic as well as political effects of intervention (Poblocki 2019: 147). Nonetheless, an argument about the pitfalls of ‘engagement’ can, in certain discourses, render the term ambiguous, just as ‘collaboration’, ‘appropriation’ or ‘experiment’ can take

⁴ Vigorously debated positions in a recent overview of Polish anthropology: Cervinková (2019) and Poblocki (2019) dwell on fresh interest in anthropological engagement and action research, where Brocki (2019) sees advocacy working to the detriment of anthropology’s capacity to contradict common perceptions and the obviousness of problems.

positive or negative colouring. Other terms, such as ‘fraud’ or ‘deceit’, carry more consistent values. Yet ‘terms’ themselves have to this point been in the background.

We might have imagined that whatever the substance of an engagement, its meaning would be stabilised by the precise terms (like book ends) holding it in place; needless to add, precision itself turns out to be a dependent variable (Tsing 2009: 11). Thus the terms (conditions) under which EASA was founded invited contextual interpretation; apart from constitutive rules of membership were the presuppositions and expectations that went into forming an association, the limits put on its activities, and the ends – as in goal or ambition – of its endeavours, all of varying significance to its members. No less contextual is the fact that the word also denotes itself as a ‘word’; in English a ‘term’ is a verbal expression, often used as a synonym for word or phrase.⁵ So the term doubles up rules and conditions with the linguistic manner of their specification.

Much disciplinary activity is concerned with striking a balance between, on the one hand, agreement over concepts in order to establish the credibility of specific definitions and, on the other, experimentation with language leading to new or unexpected horizons of verbal expression. Out of this comes an empirical question concerning particular practices: the way in which terms are mobilised compels attention to usage. For anthropologists and their interlocutors, the compulsion is likely to include curiosity. Indeed curiosity is a form of scholarly interest that for anthropology is as ethnographically as it is theoretically fed. Being curious in how terms are activated can suddenly seem more ‘interesting’ than defining or refining them. I take up uses of terms as objects of curiosity. In addition to moving across locales, we can also feed curiosity while staying in one place.

TERMS: the colour of words

Older EASA members will recall the first meeting place, Coimbra: Adam Kuper’s inspiration, João de Pina-Cabral’s hospitality and Sydel Silverman making it all possible. Europe’s many languages set a scene of disciplinary heteroglossia and implied an ambition of common communication. From the outset, one of EASA’s goals was to embrace difference across Europe’s scholarly traditions (Archetti 2003: 106). Coimbra was also the venue of another of EASA’s founding moments: debate over its language of business. The eventual tendency was no doubt influenced by what was already in global use; as Descola observed, ‘English has become a sort of Latin of the late twentieth century, a convenient vehicle for exchanges within the scientific community’ (1998: 115–16), just as French increased as Latin declined over the course of the European Enlightenment. Rather than rehearse those EASA debates,⁶ curiosity might lead in another direction. A language is no less idiosyn-

⁵ In late Latin the use of *terminus* for the definition or limitation of a word led to it becoming a synonym for any word used in a definite or limited sense, and hence for any word expressing a concept.

⁶ They included concerns about forms of dominance (Eriksen 2019: 214–15). Pertinent here is Ganguly’s description of present-day nationalist India, and the predicament of those who write and teach in English. She queries the ‘terms of engagement’ by which Indian anthropologists should be addressing their different publics. English is ‘so mandatory – so doxic, even – that it is difficult for many of my generation to formulate arguments in the vernacular’ (Ganguly 2017: 528). They need to engage both non-English-speaking audiences and the English-speaking middle classes who are vocal in decrying scholarly criticism as anti-national.

cratic for being a lingua franca. What *is* this convenient vehicle from which anthropology derives so many terms of expression?

Utterance itself may be suspicious. ‘What is speech?’ asked Charlemagne’s son Pepin, ‘The betrayer of the soul’, that is, of thought, just as early English Quakers took words to be ‘seducers of the mind’. However, I turn attention to this one language, English, not to problematise the ineffable or illusory, nor to dwell directly on fakery, deceit or misinterpretation, but to take up words as anthropologists determinedly use them in pursuit of their studies. It is a matter of not completely trusting what is useful, and indeed much used (Ahmed 2019). And were I to further focus on a single term, ‘relation (or relations)’ has piqued my curiosity for a long time. It is, after all, among anthropology’s prime terms of engagement. Relation carries its own connotations of engagement, as between ‘terms to a relation’, but I dwell on relation *as* a term, a word.

Relation has its own character or colour in English. On the one hand, like ‘link’ or ‘knowledge’, for a writer constructing a narrative the term generally has positive connotations. Arguments flow through the relations that are made. Like ‘kinship’ or ‘friendship’, vernacular usage speaks to bonds of commonality that are benign before they are anything else. Conversely a negative tenor is often cast over ‘separation’ or ‘difference’. On the other hand, its ubiquity also conveys a generic quality, and when designating kin (as in the substantives ‘relation’ or ‘relative’) it makes an abstraction of connections more vividly rendered through blood or genes. Those curious about European languages might remark that such a designation of kin is a largely English idiosyncrasy. Whatever is bundled together in the word, its usage as a key term of 20th-century British social anthropology carried a real world resonance with the interconnectedness of ideas, persons, actions, values. Identifying relations worked as an end point of anthropological endeavour.

These assertions might be more judiciously rendered in terms of analytical or theoretical choice, not to speak of context and argument. Yet there is a traction to the English-language term ‘relation’ that does not seem reducible to scholarly discernment. Anglo-Gallic perplexities over descent and alliance still lingered in the air 30 years ago; to those who thought the whole must come before the parts, the fragmented correlations of English-speaking anthropologists were frustratingly incomplete (e.g. Dumont 2006: 52). But suppose English-speakers were endowing relations with something like a generative force, specifically the positive capacity to ‘create’ links, as between descent groups? – A scandal to theorists for whom a condition of social formation already included such links. – Although they did not stop borrowings of all kinds, as in the popularity of Francophone models in Anglophone anthropology, notions of relational capacity would make a difference to understanding and exposition alike.

So common to be unremarkable, a particular construction of the relation (or relations) invites our curiosity. I refer to what happens when the preposition ‘between’ follows *Inter*, a Latin-derived counterpart to the Anglo-Saxon word, is equally common, and the construction – interrelations, relation(s) between – is hardly exclusive to English. Patterns of use is another matter, however, and English speakers use it where logic might hesitate.

TERMS: externalising relations

Anglophone expressions for internal relations, those constitutive of the reality of the terms being related, habitually draw on interpersonal examples. A French philosopher discussing external and internal relations has this to say on English usage.

The difficulty we have in understanding internal relations often arises from the examples that we are asked to consider and the language in which those examples are presented, a language that mixes logical interests with considerations that are entirely foreign to logic. Individuals are mentioned: Mr. and Mrs. Smith. We are then told that there exists *between* them [*entre eux*] a relationship and that this relationship is very important, ... and that it therefore affects these two people down to their most intimate reality, so much so that it is declared that the relationship is *internal*. For if it were not internal, it would be superficial, inconsequential, like the fact of being seated next to a stranger in the metro. Yet the very language in which we are invited to posit this internal relationship indicates that it is rather a connection that is exterior to the reality of both parties since it is, as we have just said, 'between them'. (Descombes 2014: 199; original emphasis)

As an individual, each spouse is absolutely distinct, whereas – logically speaking – an internal relation cannot be posited between entities conceived as independent of, and thus external to, each other. 'Internal relations can only link relative beings, beings under a certain description – not elements but the parts of a whole' (2014: 199).

Holistic expositions presuppose an encompassing structure, relations specifying the way its parts move with one another; relations exist everywhere, co-extensive with the whole, the dependence of each on all being self-evident. In atomistic expositions, by contrast, pre-existing entities enter into relations with one another, creating links among themselves that remain external to each. Yet suppose neither of these conditions quite captures vernacular English usage?⁷ We have just been given the evidence: an acrobatic mix of the logical and nonlogical, the hybrid Mr and Mrs Smith. The English notion of intrinsic relations existing between otherwise separate entities may be imagined in such a way that the individuality of distinct beings seemingly co-exists with relational understandings of their mutuality and dependence on one another. Otherwise put, the vernacular truth seems to be that the phrase 'relations between' applies indiscriminately, regardless of the interdependence or contingency of phenomena.⁸ Relations exist everywhere, but now like free agents with the potential to connect anything with anything else.

Remarking the obvious, that there are entailments to verbal constructions, is not to recommend an ideal language but rather to foster an ethnographic curiosity about usage, everyday and academic. One might wonder, for example, at the Anglophone penchant for dyadic thinking in anthropological comparison as though parties to a relation naturally formed pairs, as though putting separate entities together would yield the similarities and dissimilarities that reveal the relation between them. A common objection, sometimes identified as holistic, is to point to the ground for comparison in a strong sense, the constituting third term that acts like the witnessing presence of a third party to an event (e.g. Bonnemère 2018; Rio 2007). Taking neither side, I speculate as to whether there may be an English-speaking inclination to subsume the third position under the very act of relating, as though relating itself had a positive presence, an autonomous capacity, made evident in the ability to reconcile similarities and dissimilarities apparently intrinsic to the elements being compared.

⁷ Different again from the relation as 'unfinished objectivation', by which Di Giminiani and González Gálvez (2018: 200) sidestep the antithesis.

⁸ Pina-Cabral (2017) firmly criticises anthropological usage in this mode.

TERMS: caveats

No-one is being asked to agree with that speculation. But it is what one might expect when practices of exposition supporting anthropological analysis also get in the way of it. Thus what is true of the acrobatic Mr and Mrs Smith is true of Anglophone theorisations of personhood, where controversy continues over the analytically mixed nature of interpersonal relations (Strathern 2017). Going beyond English usage alone, I pause on those effects of external relations where relating implies a supposition about the prior discreteness of entities and sustains that as a concept. Insofar as *inter* for ‘between’ (if more than two, ‘among’) works to bring things together by creating boundaries to cross, it itself signals the presence of boundaries. Hence the construction of the term international simultaneously overcomes and reinstates national distinctiveness.

A decade ago, a study of academic research across Europe, sponsored by the Czech Academy of Sciences, uncovered a constituent feature of disciplinary cultures: gaps between abstractly formulated ‘policy imaginaries of science networks’ (networks evoked innovation and synergy) and ‘togetherness in practice’ (Felt 2009: 143). The context was the relentless top-down promotion of interdisciplinarity in research practice, a European policy ever hopeful of ‘breaking down barriers between subject areas’ (2009: 154). In practice, reports of difficulties doing interdisciplinary work (a ‘clash of cultures’ said one) were legion, alongside other reports of exhilaration in ignoring boundaries altogether. Nonetheless the notion of boundary crossing remained a policy marker of excellence. So the term interdisciplinary has endured, such mundane usage perpetuating the imagination of a *terra nullius* made up of otherwise unrelated entities.

At its extreme, one wonders what support such relating might give to the xenophobia noted earlier. This is not to side-step those social or historical analyses, or myriad other factors, which engage many investigators; that would be absurd. Rather it is to point to the xenophobic appropriation of notions of inclusion-and-exclusion, given that such notions can apply anywhere, to class, religion, ethnicity, indeed culture (Stolcke 1995). The same expositional use of relations-between-things that would ameliorate the consequences of such exclusions – let’s bridge the gap, cross the boundary – perpetuates the ontological priority of those entities. It is as though the more phenomena are described as individuated the more interrelatedness is necessary; the more the need for interrelation is expressed, the more individuation rules supreme.

If this feels like lockdown, another balcony moment waits. There is a whole field of languages in front of us and thus manifold opportunities to work on the work of exposition (Capo 2019). Not just anthropological languages but – across all of Europe – everyone’s vernaculars: here are potential sources of reflection, including reflection on dominant tongues. Where that is English, it is important to know what English entails. In being myself curious about uses of the term relation(s), the intent has been equally ethnographic and critical. And in harnessing a critical curiosity about this global language, I add how suspiciously that particular term (relation) has been regarded by colleagues from other traditions. Notable Portuguese-speaking and French-speaking scholars,⁹ themselves masters of English, have specifically appraised or voiced objections to what arguably emerge as its idiosyncratic Anglophone connotations.

⁹ Among others, Bruno Latour, João de Pina-Cabral, Isabelle Stengers, Eduardo Vivieros de Castro; aspects of the appraisals are discussed in Strathern (2020).

From time to time, Anglophone anthropologists comment on the fascination that comes from bringing discrete entities together. Perhaps this is a small anthropological gain to extract from vernacular English usage when it runs together internal and external relations. Pursuing something as strong as interdependence nonetheless expressed as relations-between-things gives an impetus to curiosity itself, not least for its anticipation of the unexpected. Curiosity flourishes in many ways – the assertion is not exclusive – but conceivably this is one of them.

There is something to be learnt from taking care of our diverse languages, then, especially those verbal habits that guide exposition. The more scholars argue through commonly held theoretical and analytical assumptions, the more valuable such care seems. Thirty years ago it was foreshadowed in EASA's expressed hope of nourishing Europe's 'anthropological diversity' (Galey 1992: ii). It can be said with a different inflection today. In tumultuous times our worlds need all the conceptual and expositional resources they can gather. The pan-European possibility offers an opening into what otherwise remain often unspoken conditions of engagement, namely the effect and affect of everyone's vernacular idioms. This applies whether speaking in one's vernacular or not. It is a potential that in turn keeps learning open, an openness conspicuously absent from the callous political ignorance shown in the central (Westminster) UK government's reactions to Covid-19.

Yet how to take care of languages of exposition without policing them? The scholar has a trick up her sleeve – taking care by finding things interesting. Anthropologists' extra trick lies in the particular form of curiosity they call ethnographic. Delving into some of the connotations of relations has, from this perspective, meant engaging with the detail. Thus it has thrown up the kind of positive expectation that often accompanies the English term, as well as the anticipation that anything may be related. That the latter applies to academics, astrologers and conspiracy theorists alike is the warning with which it comes.

Possibility and potential

Perhaps Covid-19 has been a tutor too. It is not asking us to trust it, but is loudly making us ask what people can trust of one another. As in momentarily clearing the skies, the virus has brought clarity to what social scientists, biologists, ecologists, novelists and thinkers of all stripes have been articulating for decades: co-existence, interdependence, symbiosis, relationality. English is certainly not alone, but when they do use English writers and thinkers have to struggle against the persistent grammatical presumption of phenomenal discreteness. This is of no little moment for a discipline engaged with diverse cosmologies over and again telling it otherwise (e.g. de la Cadena and Blaser 2018; Omura et al., 2019). Could Covid-19 energise anthropology to re-render ethnographic understandings of those worlds whose premises never prioritised discreteness, while bringing something fresh to those that do? Virus as meteor, colliding with old habits of exposition.

A Coronavirus does not care, infection-transmission recalling Stengers' (2010) indifferent ecology of practices. Consider, however, what people are telling themselves about their own worlds – banning inter-country travel, keeping households apart, emptying public arenas, two metres here, three months there. Locking down populations could not more vividly announce, we are already related. One person's breath is another person's air, including the stranger's in the metro. Relations become newly articulated: neighbourhood consciousness, protocols for digital discourse, tuning

instruments through a fence. Not to speak of intensified relations of marginalisation, domestic violence and poverty. ‘Under what conditions can the truth of social deprivation be seen?’ (Rose 2020: 5). An imaginary of isolation has brought home myriad ways in which people are composed of persons, places, techniques, institutions. Even the notion of society has been brought back into vocabularies from which it was banished.

Yet who wants to bring things back? Given that now commonplace question, one detail drives the continuing climate emergency movement. As horrendously as melting glaciers and unseasonal fires, but perhaps crucial for describing them, the virus has shown the extent to which everyone is already implicated while simultaneously stimulating countless re-engagements (with issues; with one another). It is a combination that diverse inflections of the term relation capacitate in diverse ways. But do anthropologists want to settle back into existing capacities for description? Shouldn’t they allow themselves to be shaken? Learning implies such an acknowledgment. If English-speakers find it hard to think of separation or difference as a means of relating, think of keeping one’s distance as an expression of care, and fences and walls – with or without holes – as bringing people together.¹⁰

Of whatever stripe, anthropologists have long paid attention to relations where others have not always done so. If a presumption of relationality starts becoming common currency, part of the vernacular, the discipline’s terms of engagement would shift. (When relatedness becomes implicit, new elements become explicit.) And if English-speakers learn to take relating as a starting point, what critical space is opened up?

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¹⁰ An observation made almost from the beginning of the pandemic (Benvenuto 2020: 24; Adams 2020). Ronchi (2020: 19) adds how the wall of statutory isolation has become ‘a means to communicate, not the sign of exclusion’. On walls, recall the EASA 2018 Keynote (Khosravi 2019).

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Conditions d'engagement

L'anthropologie n'est rien si ce n'est une manière particulière de décrire le monde. Pourtant, ce qu'elle a de plus précieux – les termes et les concepts qui la distinguent en tant que discipline – est parfois extrêmement complexe. Alors que la résurgence des frontières et les exclusions déforment les récits de vérité et les contrefaçons de toutes les manières possibles, il serait urgent que l'anthropologie réfléchisse à la vie conceptuelle qu'elle tente d'exprimer. La manière dont elle s'engage a toujours dépendu de (l'attention portée à) la manière dont les termes sont utilisés, ce qu'elle a en commun avec les acteurs au sein des thèmes abordés. La vigilance critique n'a jamais été aussi importante. L'examen des teintes et résonances de divers usages verbaux, anciens et nouveaux, révèle des moments où le langage agit à la fois avec nous et contre nous. En effet, un soutien de la xénophobie et d'autres phénomènes du genre peuvent se trouver là où l'on s'y attend le moins. Sur cette base, cet article envisage un avenir pour les exposés anthropologiques. Quel meilleur endroit pour commencer qu'au sein de la communauté multilingue EASA.

Mots-clés conditions d'enquête, fraude, xénophobie, utilisation de la langue, relation