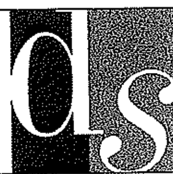
The social ontology of intentions



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ABSTRACT This article addresses the issue of how to develop a theory of interpretation of social action (discourse included) that takes into consideration culture-specific claims about intentions while simultaneously allowing for a pan-human, universal dimension of intentionality. It is argued that to achieve such a goal, it is necessary to agree on a basic definition of intentionality and on the conditions that allow for its investigation. After briefly discussing the limitations of applying an (English-based) 'narrow' notion of intention to the analysis of other languages and cultures, a more general and basic analytic notion of intentionality is proposed, that is, as aboutness (as defined by Husserl). By applying this more general notion of intentionality, we can then examine both the content of intentional acts and the conditions that allow for their study across cultural contexts through 'bracketing'. This is made possible by the social ontology of intentions, which is what enables the analysis of human conduct and its interpretation. Our methods and hypotheses must be evaluated over and against such an existential premise.

KEY WORDS: *cross-cultural analysis of experience and interaction, culture-specific and universal properties of intentional acts, intentionality, intersubjectivity*

Introduction

On 1 November 2004, I received an email message from Teun van Dijk where he asked me to qualify my apparent rejection (in Duranti, 1993) of, as he put it, 'an "intentionalist" approach to discourse.' My reply to his message constituted the beginning of a series of exchanges in which van Dijk and I did our best to clarify our respective positions on intentionality and yet, in some respects, continued to talk across each other. It was in the midst of our exchange that Teun told me about his idea to edit this special issue. Thus, it appears appropriate for me to use the invitation to participate in this collective endeavor as an opportunity to

rearticulate my position on new grounds. Putting earlier hesitations aside, I have decided to talk about 'the social ontology of intentions' because I find the use of intentions in the social and cognitive sciences extremely problematic and yet unavoidable. I believe that it is possible to develop a theory of interpretation of social action (discourse included) that takes into consideration culture-specific claims about intentions while simultaneously allowing for a pan-human, universal dimension of intentionality. To achieve such a goal, a few prerequisites are necessary. In what follows I will focus on two of them. For the first prerequisite, we need to agree on a definition of intentionality. For the second, we need to agree on a method of inquiry. These are no small feats. But nobody said it was going to be easy.

I believe that the notion of intention as it is adopted in most contemporary cognitive approaches to action (or discourse), is conceptually spurious and empirically fragile and yet, since we need to recognize intentionality in human action, we cannot escape the search for a definition. My proposal is to put in motion two apparently opposing but in fact mutually beneficial analytical enterprises: 1) a search for the most basic and thus putatively universal level of intentional acts, and 2) a simultaneous analysis of the ways in which such a basic and putatively universal level is transformed (often by combining multiple acts and semiotic resources) into culture-specific phenomena, including the experience of 'intention' or 'intending' which has been harshly criticized in the past by some anthropologists and linguists (myself included). I believe that one of the obstacles to clarifying a universal understanding of intentionality within linguistic anthropology has been in part due to the use of the anthropological method of estrangement (in the sense of making the 'familiar' into the 'strange') in the limited scope afforded by cross-cultural comparison. Such a method uses the interpretive notions and practices of another (usually non-western) group to question the universality of the interpretive notions and practices of (usually western) philosophical approaches, which are thus shown to be local, that is, culture-specific, as opposed to universal. But the reverse has not been done. The local theories described by anthropologists are rarely matched against putative universal principles. This makes sense as a way of avoiding cultural biases and imposing the researcher's views and beliefs on the local practices, but it does not recognize that any kind of description of other people's actions, thoughts, and feelings implies cross-cultural intersubjectivity and that, therefore, we are, in some implicit way at least, imagining, feeling, enacting (e.g. through language and embodying), what it must be like to be an Other (of a particular kind). What is this kind of intersubjectivity based upon? What kind of intentionality does it recognize?

I believe that we can start to face these questions only if we make our analytical methods more explicit and apply them in a more consistent way. One solution is to adopt the phenomenological method of 'bracketing' as originally introduced by Husserl in his discussion of various forms of 'reduction' or *epoché* (Husserl, 1917/1987, 1931, 1989). Bracketing is necessary for suspending judgment and thus for 'putting out of action' what Husserl called 'the natural standpoint' and anthropologists might rename 'the cultural standpoint'[2]. For those working on human interaction, the suspension of our beliefs and attitude should be recognized as a de facto recurrent methodological step, emerging at various moments during data collection and data analysis, from participant-observation to inscription (through recording devices first and transcripts of various sorts later). Quite routinely, a considerable amount of bracketing is, for example, at work in all attempts to stop the natural (i.e. 'cultural') flow of interaction in order to identify some of its aspects as types of actions (e.g. a request, a promise, an apology, a greeting, an accusation, a story, a demonstration of affection, a challenge, a regret, a description, a naming of a person, time, or place). Although intersubjectivity is implied in all of these cases, as in all human affairs, the analysis of social action by those working on 'discourse' (broadly defined) typically requires an effort to assume a particular intersubjective stance in a *conscious, deliberate way*, like when we try to think, feel or even act like our 'subjects'. In some cases, we might even have to assume a higher level of intersubjectivity that blocks a low level of intersubjectivity. This is the case, for example, when the people we study tell us that one cannot *know* what is in another person's mind or when, perhaps more revealingly, they *act as if* they could not know or do not care about what is in someone else's mind (e.g. Duranti, 1993). In such cases, we try to imagine what it must be like to make sense of another person's action without presupposing the ability to guess what he or she is thinking about or planning. In this endeavor, we are guided by the systematic observation of what people do with and expect from one another. We are then confronted with the fact that there exists a level of intentionality that is pervasive in human action, a level that cannot be denied and at the same time is distinct from the particular conceptualizations offered by a particular language or discourse. I believe that much of the disagreement between those who favor the reading of participants' intentions and those who don't (see below) stems from the confusion between these two levels.

Problems with 'intention' and 'intending'

Intentionality in general and intentions (or intentional acts) in particular have been interpreted in widely different ways within philosophy and cognitive science. For example, Myles Brand (1984: 5) identified 'planning' as one of the (cognitive) features of what he calls 'intentional action'. John Searle, on the other hand, takes 'intending' to be 'just one form of Intentionality along with belief, hope, fear, desire, and lots of others' (Searle, 1983: 3). For Dennett (1987), an intentional system is a system that can be assumed to act rationally on the basis of certain beliefs. Beyond the differences between these authors, they all share the view that a specific sense of 'intending' as a human quality or activity can be isolated and defined in cognitive terms, regardless of whether or not it is considered to be a conscious process. My reading of this type of literature is that

it utilizes a commonsense understanding of intention that is very close to 'a determination to do a specified thing or act in a specified manner' (Webster, second college edition, 1974: 733). Although this definition – which I will call here for practical purposes 'narrow' – might represent some basic meaning of the English verb *intend* and the related noun *intention*, it turns out to be problematic cross-linguistically and cross-culturally, as demonstrated by the difficulty of translating it into other languages. Even the Latin noun *intentio* and the Latin verb *intendere* from which English *intention* and *intend* derive (through Old French) have semantic dimensions and associations that are different from those evoked by the narrow definition. In particular, rather than being primarily descriptions of psychological states, the Latin terms tend to convey the sense of a bodily extension or effort made toward some place, action, or effect.

When we move outside of Indo-European languages, we are also confronted by some translation challenges. In Samoan, for example, it is difficult to find a good translation of the English *intention* as defined above. Pratt's (1911) *Grammar and Dictionary of the Samoan Language* gives *manatu* and *fa`amoemoe* as translations of 'intention'. That this is a stretch or at best an approximation is shown by the fact that in the Samoan-English part of the same dictionary *manatu* is translated as 'thought' and *fa`amoemoe* is translated as 'hope, expectation'. These concepts are related to the concept covered by the English *intention* but they are not synonymous. George B. Milner's (1966) *Samoan Dictionary* does not have *intention* in the English-Samoan section, but the term appears as one of the possible (secondary) meanings of the word *loto* as the Samoan translation of *will* (Milner, 1966: 462). The term *loto*, however, is closer to the English *attitude*, *disposition* or *inclination* than to *intention*. This view finds support in the Samoan-English part of Milner's dictionary, where, *loto*'s first translation is '[h]eart, feeling (as opposed to mind and soul)' (Milner, 1966: 112), and the second is 'will'. In the same entry, as a verb, *loto* is translated as 'consent, agree'. Furthermore, a list of compound words that follow include *loto-`āiga* for 'loyal, devoted to one's family and kin' (literally, '*loto*-family'); *loto-fiafia* 'jolly' (literally, '*loto*-happy'), and *loto-leaga* 'jealous, envious' (literally, '*loto*-bad'). Common features of these compounds are that they: i) do not refer to actions that are planned, but instead tend to coincide with dispositions or inclinations; ii) do not express ways of being of which a person is necessarily conscious; iii) do not display a recurring set of beliefs that can be attached to or are implied by these states; iv) tend to have an affective meaning; and v) tend to be *embodied* attitudes or practices (i.e. they are usually expressed through and interpreted as a combination of verbal and kinesic behavior).

Does this mean that Samoans do not recognize *intentions* in the narrow English sense? This is a question that should be approached empirically. For one thing, we know that speakers first and languages later can and do adopt new words and new meanings. For example, Samoan borrowed words like *time* (Samoan *taimi*) and *duty* (Samoan *tiute*) from English and *natura* 'nature' from Latin. Languages can also recycle existing words to express a new meaning. For

example, a few years ago I found the term *loto* used in a newspaper article (*The Weekly Samoa Post*, 17 April 2000: 5) discussing a murder case that involved two government ministers accused of having convinced someone else (who was the son of one of the ministers) to cold-bloodedly execute another minister. *Loto* was used in the context of the phrase *le moliaga o le fasioti tagata ma le loto i ai*, which could be translated in English as 'the accusation of killing (a person or persons) with the *loto* to (do) it.' This confirms Milner's (and his Samoan consultants') intuition that if one had to translate the English *intention* in Samoan, *loto* would be one viable solution. However, it is not a trivial detail that this use of *loto* is found in the context of an imported western practice (i.e. a trial), where individual responsibility must be ascertained and evaluated by taking into account an individual's state of mind (e.g. motives and planning). This is an institution that is quite different from the Samoan political-judicial councils (*fono*) I studied (e.g. Duranti, 1990, 1994). In those arenas, when a case is being discussed, the emphasis is on the effects or consequences of a person's actions, not on one's state of mind. For example, in 1979 an orator was blamed for reporting a promise made by someone else that was not honored (Duranti, 1993). Data of this kind originally prompted me to argue that intentions are overrated in speech act theory and that much of social interaction takes place and is analyzed, at least in a place like Samoa, without social actors having to evoke intentions (in the above English sense). My line of reasoning was consistent with other accounts of Samoan interactional practices (Ochs, 1982; Shore, 1982) and either reiterated or anticipated the critique of intentionalist theories of actions by anthropologists working in other parts of the world (e.g. Rosaldo, 1982; Rosen, 1985, 1995; Du Bois, 1987; Moermon, 1988). My own account and those of other ethnographers who dealt with these issues share a basic culture-relativist position, whereby interpretive practices are seen as culture-specific and fundamentally incommensurable. In rejecting the notion of intention as used by (mostly English-speaking) speech act theorists and cognitive scientists, such a relativist stance either rejects altogether the idea that intentionality is a relevant factor in human action or takes an agnostic position. I have come to the conclusion that this view is problematic. Intentionality *is* always involved in human action. But the difficulty of finding an adequate translation for the narrow definition of 'intention', the dissatisfaction with the analyses of social acts based on such a notion (Heritage, 1990/1), and the fact that in so many societies, members avoid engaging in explicit mind-reading, have prompted a number of scholars (myself included) to avoid dealing with intentionality altogether. This result is unfortunate for a number of reasons, the first of which is the inability of researchers to provide a solid empirical basis for potential comparison. It is difficult to argue that two groups or communities rely on different sets of interpretive practices (or different epistemologies) without being able to agree on the criteria whereby such interpretive practices are identified and reconstructed. Regardless of the type of data involved (e.g. audio-visual recordings of spontaneous interactions, written texts of various kinds,

results of experiments, introspection), all researchers need concepts, methods, and tools that are general and generalizable, otherwise each analysis risks being ad hoc. A first step toward the use of intentionality across situations and methods is the recognition of a basic and universal level of intentionality on which to build language- and culture-specific intentional acts.

A universal sense of intentionality

Drawing on Brentano's and Husserl's original formulations, I take intentionality to be the 'aboutness' of our mental and physical activity, that is, the property that our thoughts and embodied actions have to be directed toward something, which may be imagined, seen, heard, touched, smelled, remembered, or maybe a state of mind to be reflected upon (in this case, a second-order intentional act). This property of being directed does not presuppose that a well-formed thought precedes action. Our body projects this very basic sense of intentionality, for example, through our posture and gestures. Gaze movements are routinely interpreted by others, sometimes as an icon of our inner reactions and evaluations, other times as an index of what we might do next, or simply as a sign of our willingness to be a listener (Goodwin, 1981). In certain types of greetings in Samoa, participants gaze into mid-air as if they are not looking at anyone in particular, even though people might be sitting facing them (Duranti, 1992). In such a case, even though the gaze is not directed at anything or anyone, it is *directed* in the sense of being *constitutive* of a particular type of cultural activity.

Even in the case of highly codified semiotic systems such as historical-natural languages, we should not assume that the 'directionality' or 'aboutness' of talk is always identifiable in terms of a linguistically encoded concept or a linguistic category of action, such as a speech act (Silverstein, 1977). A thought may not be completely developed before the act of speaking (Merleau-Ponty, 1962) and language may force us to be over-specific with respect to our desires (Dennett, 1987). In other instances, the implications of our words are often made apparent by the reaction of our audience. This is often discovered by political candidates confronted with interpretations of their words that are perfectly reasonable given the context and yet do not correspond to what the candidates seem eager to project (Duranti, 2003). In all of these cases, we might be able to recognize the 'directionality' of particular communicative acts (e.g. through talk and embodiment) without being able to specify whether speakers did or did not have the narrow intention to communicate what is being attributed to them by their listeners.

There are other times, though, when we might feel more secure in our judgment. Ethnographers rely on such moments. Whether we study the actions, thoughts, and feelings of people in our own community (as philosophers, sociologists and many discourse analysts usually do) or the actions, thoughts, and feelings of people in other communities (as linguistic anthropologists usually do), any analysis of the meaning of actions, thoughts, and feelings of others implies that it is possible to move from the most basic and general level of intentionality to more complex types of intentionality, where a multiplicity of acts must be evoked (e.g. through the use of multiple codes or through complex linguistic encoding). This must be possible only if we assume that, in addition to culture-specific representations, there is a universal experiential level that is accessible across cultural divides not only for some basic perceptions such as seeing, hearing, and touching, but also for experiences that have been shown to be culture-sensitive and culture-directed such as suffering and empathizing, loving and hating, being curious or oblivious, being concise, elegant, and even verbose. These are all modes of being that we must be able to have some kind of experiential access to in order to describe them. We owe such accessibility to the most basic type of intersubjectivity, which is activated through the social ontology of intentional acts. We come to formulate hypotheses regarding what others are up to because their being in the world is always a social way of being in the world and, as such, it is on display for each other first and foremost but also for the analyst later.

Decades of analysis of face-to-face situations among the most diverse communities around the world have revealed how typically human acts such as requesting and providing information, telling stories, complaining, remembering together, greeting – just to mention a few of the myriad social acts accomplishable through discursive practices – are simultaneously *universal* acts, that is, acts constitutive of individuals as representatives of the species *homo sapiens*, and *particular* acts, that is, acts that come from and realize particular *kinds* of human beings, who are engaged in particular types of cultural activities, which call for and receive evaluation. In other words, human social life provides us with copious evidence of the fact that *the ontology of intentional life cannot but always be a social ontology* precisely because the world is made up of places, objects and people imbued with socio-cultural values. As made obvious by phenomenological analysis (e.g. Husserl, 1931: 93), in our everyday experience we do not just encounter individuals who look, touch, smile, wink, nod, listen, and tell us what time it is or how to get to where we want to go. We encounter particular types of persons, who can be (and usually are) evaluated in terms of practical, moral, and aesthetic canons. The persons we deal with are (to themselves and to others, ourselves included) good or bad, generous or selfish, empathic or indifferent, conservative or innovative, elegant or ordinary, cool or lame.

This means that the predicament of our social ontology is that we cannot be human *in general* (i.e. in universal terms) without being human *in particular*, that is, without defining ourselves and being defined by others as particular types of persons, that is, subjects who – under circumstances that are always particular (even though generalizable) – display, for example, compassion or hate, hope or despair, care or indifference toward real or imagined entities. It is this property of human existence that makes its detailed documentation possible and, at the same time, necessary. If we accept that intentionality is a directionality or aboutness (of our thinking, feeling, and doing) that always has both universal

and culture-specific manifestations, we do not have to sacrifice the complexity of the human experience. But when we document it (e.g. through discourse analysis), we need to clarify the level at which our analysis is made so as to render it challengeable.

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NOTE

1. Despite Husserl's antipathy for any 'anthropological' philosophy (e.g. Husserl (1931/1981), the 'natural standpoint' for Husserl was anything but 'biological' and therefore the connection between phenomenology and the study of culture is quite legitimate, as pointed out by a number of authors, including Paci (1973), Jackson (1996), Throop and Murphy (2002) and Throop (2003).

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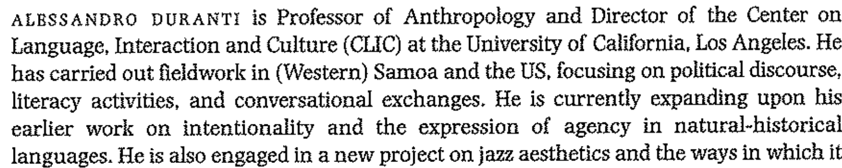

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