FAMOUS THEORIES AND LOCAL THEORIES: THE SAMOANS AND WITTGENSTEIN

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«His idea of his book is not that anyone by reading it will understand his ideas, but that some day someone will think them out again for himself, and will derive great pleasure from finding in this book their exact expressions. I think he exaggerates his own verbal inspiration, it is much more careful than I supposed but I think it reflects the way the ideas came to him which might not be the same with another man. [...] He says I shall forget everything he explains in a few days; [...] It's terrible when he says "is that clear" and I says "no" and he says "Damn it's *horrid* to go through that again". Sometimes he says I can't see that now we must leave it.» (From a letter the British mathematician F.P. Ramsey wrote to his mother in 1923 while visiting Wittgenstein in Austria; cf. Wittgenstein 1973: 78).

1. Introduction*

A commonplace in anthropology is that a fieldworker should always try to balance a good knowledge of past and current theories with an open-mindness toward new data and new observations (cf. Malinowski 1922: 8-9). In fact, in the mundane world of conferences, journals, departments, and academic

parties, one often finds anthropologists, as well as other social scientists, accusing one another of being either too close to their data or too distant from any data. I think, however, that this contrast is more ideological than anything else and that in fact over the years we leave behind the question of whether we are seeing the forest or the trees. Instead, to many of us, the people we lived with and studied helped us open a new window on a slice of the universe we couldn't see before. By then, a funny metamorphosis may have taken place. The "local theories" we have been discovering become the tools with which we make sense of the famous theories we were given by our disciplines. We create new audiences for old speakers. Across time and space, local theories not only illuminate famous theories, they may also replace them as the leading paradigm in our own science.

In this paper, I will make this process overt by using what I consider the Samoan theory of language and social practice to illuminate some aspects of Wittgenstein's theory of language and rule-governed behavior. I will first point out some striking similarities between the Samoan theory and Wittgenstein's "later" theory. I will then proceed to propose that by viewing Wittgenstein's philosophy through the Samoan notion of task accomplishment as always a joint, cooperative enterprise, we can better understand some of the problems that Wittgenstein had in completing his work and making himself understood by his students and colleagues.

2. The two Wittgensteins

It is well known that Wittgenstein's *Philosophical investigations*, which is considered as the official document of his "later" philosophy, did not meet the same amount of approval and enthusiasm in the philosophical world as the earlier *Tractatus*. For one thing, it is true that *Philosophical investigations* is not as precise and as organized as the *Tractatus* – its author seemed to be aware of this and in fact worried about the negative consequences of his own style (cf. Malcom 1984). The "imperfections", as well as its incompleteness, I would like to suggest, are however part of the message. Wittgenstein's later philosophy is, for one thing, an extremely dialogical genre in which an immaginary interlocutor is constantly asking questions or raising objections, and can at times lose track of which one of the many voices expressed is the author

and which one the commentator. It has been said that Wittgenstein's writing is "therapeutic". I would like to add that Wittgenstein's work, his philosophical "praxis", must be understood as requesting the crucial role of a committed and creative audience. Such a role and the need for conceiving of meaning and interpretation as cooperative achievements are made apparent by comparing some basic points of Wittgenstein's later philosophy with Samoan local epistemology and praxis.

3. A Samoan theory of meaning and social action

Let me briefly summarize here what I have elsewhere presented as my interpretation of the Samoan theory of meaning and social action (cf. Duranti 1984). I have been arguing that Samoans do not share what Silverstein (1979) characterizes as the "reflectionist point of view", that is, they do not share the idea that language is a way of representing some already existing reality, either "out there" or in the mind. On the contrary, Samoans see words as deeds. The same word *uiga* means both 'meaning' and 'action'. This is not to say, in a neo-kantian fashion, that language creates the world, but rather that language is part of the world, while, at the same time, a medium for explaining and constraining our social action.

For Samoans, interpretation is a public practice. Samoans often do not seem to display concern for the speakers' intentions in producing a given utterance (or in performing other social acts). Thus, for instance, Ochs (1982) observed that Samoan caregivers, in contrast to the Western middle-class ones, do not try to read intentions in the infants' early vocalizations. Even among adults there seems to be a dispreference for explicit guessing of another's unclear intentions (cf. Ochs 1985) and for defining interpretation as a mental activity. Someone's words are instead interpreted with respect to their effect or consequences and by taking into consideration the relationship between the speaker and other partecipants or components of the speech event. In another paper (Duranti 1984), I discuss a case of an orator who gets in trouble for having announced a future action by a third party which did not take place. In the discussion of the events, neither the orator nor anyone else evoked good will or intentions. The meaning of his words is defined by the effects or consequences of his words (e. g. loss of face by the village council) and on the basis of his relationship with the person whose message he delivered.

4. Wittgenstein's "earlier" theory of language

In the *Tractatus* (1922), Wittgenstein presents the prototypical version of the "reflectionist" view of language. «4.01 A proposition is a picture of reality». Referential meaning is all there is: «4.023 [...] A proposition is a description of a state of affairs». Truth conditions define what is necessary to know in order to understand a given sentence: «4.024 To understand a proposition means to know what is the case if it is true». The relationship between language and the world is isomorphic: «4.04 In a proposition there must be exactly as many distinguishable parts as in the situation that it represents». Given this common "essential" quality between language and reality, the limit of our language and the limit of our world must correspond: «5.6 The limits of my language mean the limits of my world». And at the end: «7. What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence».

Between the late 1920's and early 1930's, Wittgenstein drammatically reconsidered his earlier philosophy (1).

5. Wittgenstein's "later" view: language as public behavior

Let me start with a quote from a well known paragraph from Wittgenstein's *Philosophical investigations*:

«202. And hence also "obeying a rule" is a practice. And to *think* one is obeying a rule is not to obey a rule. Hence it is not possible to obey a rule "privately": otherwise thinking one was obeying a rule would be the same thing as obeying it» (Wittgenstein 1953).

This paragraph is often considered as a summary of the so-called "private language argument". Briefly, the main points of such an "argument" are: (1) meaning is not determined by what is in someone's mind (e.g. his intentions); (2) since no rule can determine its own application, common agreement is necessary (cf. Kripke 1982).

In other words, there must be «publicly accessible conditions that warrant the use of words» (cf. Scruton 1982: 282). Each person who claims to be following a rule (or implies so) can be checked by others on the basis of external circumstances and other relevant "criteria". («580. An "inner process" stands in need of outward criteria»).

Kripke (1982) suggested that Wittgenstein, in his "private

language argument", is not simply denying the possibility of a "private language", but, more generally, the "private model" of rule following. Wittgenstein would thus be rejecting the idea «that the notion of a person following a given rule is to be analyzed simply in terms of facts about the rule follower and the follower alone, without reference to his membership in a wider community» (Kripke 1982: 109).

This view is very close to what I have described as the Samoan theory of interpretation. A certain meaning is possible because others – organized in and by social institutions and practices – accept it within a particular context (i.e. within what Wittgenstein would have called a "game").

6. Self and language

Let me consider another similarity.

Samoans, as perhaps members of Polynesian cultures in general, don't seem to have the western notion of "self". Thus, Shore (1982: 136-7) writes:

«Not only there are in Samoan no terms corresponding to the English "personality", "self", or "character", but there is also an absence of the corresponding assumptions about the relation of person to social action. A clue to the Samoan notion of person is found in the popular Samoan saying *teu le vaa* (take care of the relationship). Constrasted with the Greek dicta "Know thyself" or "To thine own self be true" this saying suggests something of the difference between Occidental and Samoan orientations. Lacking any epistemological bias that would lead them to focus on "thing in themselves" or the essential quality of experience, Samoan instead focus on things in their relationships, and the contextual grounding of experience.
[...] When speaking of themselves or others, Samoans often characterize people in terms of specific "sides" (*ituu*) or "parts" (*pito*) [...] By parts or sides, Samoan usually mean specific connections that people bear to villages, descent groups, or titles» (Shore 1982: 136-7).

When I read Wittgenstein's discussion of the problem of the self with respect to using and interpreting language, I found, again, some interesting similarities between his thoughts and the Samoan theory.

Thus, for instance, during his "transition" between the

"early" *Tractatus* and the "late" *Investigations*, Wittgenstein was attracted by Lichtenberg's proposal to have a language in which we say "it thinks" instead of "I think" and "there is a toothache" instead of "I have a toothache" (See Kripke 1982: postscript: Ambrose 1979).

«We could have a language from which "I" is omitted from sentences describing a personal experience. Instead of saying "I think" or "I have an ache" one might say "It thinks" (like "It rains"), and in place of "I have an ache", "There is an ache here". Under certain circumstances one might be strongly tempted to do away with the simple use of "I". We constantly judge a language from the standpoint of the language we are accustomed to, and hence we think we describe phenomena incompletely if we leave out personal pronouns. It is as though we had omitted pointing to something, since the word "I" seems to point to a person. But we can leave out the word "I" and still describe the phenomenon formerly described. It is not the case that certain changes in our symbolism are really omissions.One symbolism is in fact as good as the next; no one symbolism is necessary» (Ambrose 1979: 21-2; the passage between braces is from *The yellow book*).

These observations are echoed by Samoan use of language. Samoans often use expressions where the perceiving subject is not mentioned: *'ua lavea le lima* 'the hand was cut' instead of "I have cut myself", *mamafa le isu* 'the nose is heavy' instead of "I have a cold". And in fact the omission of the perceiving subject is extended in Samoan to third person expressions: *leaga le ulu* 'the head is bad' instead of "he/she is crazy", *vave le lima* 'the hand is fast' instead of "he/she is a thief", etc.

Samoan language does not have a reflexive pronoun and there are no such expressions as "I hurt myself" or "he cut himself". Instead, such events are described as "my hand got hurt" or "his leg got a cut".

7. Interpretation as a cooperative achievement

A consideration of the strict correlation between the Samoan theory of interpretation and their practice of task accomplishment can further illuminate Wittgenstein's philosophy and render it consistent with certain aspects of his life.

As pointed out by Mead (1937), the Samoan organization of

work and task accomplishment is cooperative, albeit hierarchical. The hierarchical aspect of Samoan social organization is not manifested in terms of who takes credit for what has been done, but rather in terms of who is seen as making the decision and who is more or less active during the accomplishment of a task. Higher ranking individuals tend to be more stationary than lower ranking ones. Furthermore, rank in Samoan society is, perhaps more overtly than in other societies, extremely context-sensitive: «Their [the Samoans'] eyes are always on the play, never on the players, while each individuals's task is to fit his role» (Mead 1937: 286). Samoans do indeed see and practice task accomplishment as a joint, collective product rather than as an individual achievement.

Elinor Ochs and I have illustrated this point in the context of our discussion of the changes brought about by literacy instruction in a traditional Samoan village (Duranti & Ochs 1984). We pointed out that Samoans always see people as needing someone else to give them support during the accomplishment of any task (e.g. driving a car, delivering a baby, meeting a girlfriend, building a boat). The role of the supporting party is in fact instituzionalized in the notion of *taapua'i* 'supporter, sympatizer' and routinely reenacted in what we call the *"maaloo* exchange". Someone's accomplishment is recognized and, in fact, defined as such, by his supporters' *maaloo*. The person who performed the action or task answers back with another *maaloo*.

> «More generally, something is an accomplishment because of and through the recognition that others are willing to give it. Any accomplishment can then be seen as a joint product of both the actors and the supporters. In the Samoan view, if a performance went well it is to the supporters' merit as much as the performers'. This is so true that if the performer receives a prize or some previously established compensation, he will have to share it with his supporters» (Duranti & Ochs 1984: 16).

This view extends to interpretation of utterances. For Samoans, meaning is jointly accomplished by speaker and audience. For this reason, a Samoan speaker does not reclaim the meaning of his words by saying «I didn't mean it». A person must usually deal with the circumstances created by his words as interpreted by others in a given context and cannot protect himself behind alleged original intentions (cf. Duranti 1984 for some example).

This practice of linguistic behavior sharply contrasts with the "reflectionist view" (see above), according to which the meaning of someone's words is given by his expressed/recognizable intentions (cf. Grice 1957). In this case, the audience's role is that of recognizing what is supposedly already there.

In the transition period Wittgenstein struggled with what appeared to be a commonly accepted view of intention as a state of mind.

«44. Intention is neither an emotion, a mood, nor yet a sensation or image. It is not a state of consciousness. It does not have genuine duration» (Wittgenstein 1967).

Wittgenstein's choice seemed at times to be in favor of a phenomenological view of intention as "intention *of* something" (cf. van Peursen 1972). Thus, for instance, when he compares intention with expectation, he writes:

«56. Here my thought is: If someone could see the expectation itself – he would have to see *what* is being expected. [...]
But that's how it is: if you see the expression of expectation you see "what is expected"» (*Zettel*, Wittgenstein 1967).

Other times, however, "intending" is characterized as a movement not only toward "something" but also toward "someone":

«455. We want to say: "When we mean something, it's like going up to someone, it's not having a dead picture (of any kind)". We go up the thing we mean [...]».

«457. Yes: meaning something is like going up to someone» (Wittgenstein 1958).

These statements imply a view of meaning as a complex relationship between a speaker, an "object", and some other person (2). That the "other" – hearer, audience – could actually also move toward the speaker and "help out" is not made explicit but is certainly possible. The belief in the audience as co-author is manifested in Wittgenstein's style of teaching, as recounted by G.H. von Wright:

«From the beginning of 1930 Wittgenstein lectured at Cambridge. As might be expected, his lectures were

"unacademic". [...] He had no manuscript or notes. He *thought* before the class. Thê impression was of a tremendous concentration. The exposition usually led to a question, to which the audience were supposed to suggest an answer. The answers in turn became starting points for new thoughts leading to new questions. It depended on the audience, to a great extent, whether the discussion became fruitful and whether the connecting thread was kept in sight from the beginning to end of a lecture and from one lecture to another» (cf. Malcom 1984: 15-6).

The need for the "movement from the audience" is in fact traceable to this seemingly contradictory statement made in the preface to the *Tractatus*:

«Perhaps this book will be understood only by someone who has himself already had the thoughts that are expressed in it – or at least similar thoughts» (Wittgenstein [1922] 1961: 3).

These words seem to imply that language by itself cannot explain. Meaning is not all in the text. New meaning is not simply in the expressed propositions. It must be created cooperatively.

But given the individualistic theory of interpretation and work in Cambridge in the 1930's and 1940's, it was very difficult for Wittgenstein to elicit the cooperation that he seemed to call for – his war against "philosophy" he fought it by himself. I think this aspect of Wittgenstein's social and intellectual environment was partly responsible for his frustations and disappointments. The debates and discussions inspired by his lectures and by his posthumous works are however totally in keeping with his program, which called for a cooperative, collective effort at figuring out meaning as a form of life. Across time and space, some of that cooperation is still going on.

Notes

1. A number of sources have been reconstructed as partly responsible for Wittgenstein's "turn". Rossi-Landi (1973) discussed the possible influence of the marxist economist Piero Sraffa (see also Malcom 1984). Trinchero (1967), among others, mentioned the possible impact of a paper by Brouwer, heard by Wittgenstein in Vienna in 1928 and in which Brouwer argued that logic is not primary or basic with respect to natural language, but in fact is based on the

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latter. As pointed out by Rossi-Landi (1981), however, one must be careful not to separate too sharply between the "first" and "second" Wittgenstein. In fact, as I suggest at the end of this paper, the "late" philosophy is already emerging in some "early" statements.

2. This is in fact the "instrumental" notion of sign advocated by Bühler (1934).

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Summary

Ethnographers often use the "local" theories of the people they lived with and studied to make sense of the more "famous" theories they inherited from the western academic tradition. This paper makes this dialectical process explicit by employing the Samoan theory of language and sociocultural order to illuminate some aspects of Wittgenstein's philosophy. Both Wittgenstein and the Samoans are shown to display a view and practice of interpretation and social action as always dialogical, cooperative enterprises in which the audience must have an active and sympathetic role.

Sommario

Gli etnografi spesso usano le teorie "locali" delle comunità da loro studiate per reinterpretare le più "famose" tra le teorie ereditate dalla tradizione accademica occidentale.

L'articolo rende esplicito questo processo dialettico riesaminando alcuni punti della filosofia di Wittgenstein alla luce della teoria samoana sul linguaggio e l'ordine socioculturale. Si dimostra che sia Wittgenstein che i Samoani hanno una visione ed una prassi dell'interpretazione e dell'agire sociale come di processi dialogici e cooperativi in cui il pubblico deve avere un ruolo attivo e di identificazione.