



A confusion of tongues

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Abstract

When we maintain that an anthropologist offers 'thick descriptions' of the life of people, do we mean that it is in any way descriptive? Or, instead, that it is purely interpretative, like the creative reading of a text by a literary critic? According to Gilbert Ryle, who invented the term, a 'thick description' is just a 'thin description' made complex by the addition of adverbial information. According to Clifford Geertz, the anthropologist has no access to 'thin descriptions', he deals with conflicting views and interpretations given by the participants of 'social discourses' and has to address a permanent 'confusion of tongues'. Contemporary use of this term appears to rest upon a hidden conflict between two philosophies of anthropology.

Key Words

fieldwork • Clifford Geertz • hermeneutics • Gilbert Ryle • (thick/thin) description

Numerous anthropologists have rallied to the idea that their fieldwork consisted of doing what Clifford Geertz calls 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973). Their discipline is no more a science of pure observation than that of history or sociology. If the ethnographer wishes to convince himself of this, he need only take into consideration his own practical experience. 'What will I record in my field notebook?' this ethnographer must ask himself. If I write, 'In the middle of the city there is an edifice taller than the others and guarded by armed men', I am making use of a rather weak vocabulary, but I am not thereby more objective because this 'thin' description is not what I will be using in order to explain the lifestyle of the society being studied. In fact, one must record in his notebook a 'thick' description of the following genre: 'In the middle of the capital is found the king's palace.'

The success of the notion of thick description shows that the anthropological disciplines which practice inquiry in the field needed a term of this genre to describe their work. The problem that arises for the investigator in the field is, fundamentally, knowing how to take into account, in his descriptive work, the difference between nature and convention, between *phusis* and *nomos*. As Aristotle said: fire burns in the same way here (in Greece) and in Persia, but rights are variable. (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1134b). As long as one is content with describing the processes of fire, one has no need to distinguish two types of description (the thin and the thick). On the other hand, a certain way of dressing, of walking, of covering one's head will be regarded here as neutral behavior,

elsewhere as a punishable offense: the description must be 'thick', that is to say, it must identify the type of conduct from the point of view of the meaning that it possesses in the context in which the behavior takes place.

However, the fact that the concept of thick description has been well received does not mean that its status is clear. Is a thick description as descriptive as a thin description? Is it, like all description, a test of truth in confrontation with reality? In fact, one generally considered that to adopt this distinction between the thin and the thick was to accept a revision of the status of the sciences which have to do with convention (*nomos*) or meaning. This status would be *hermeneutical*. In other words, unlike physics (and all the natural sciences), the anthropological discipline (and all the social sciences) could not avoid having to pose the 'hermeneutical problem'.¹

THE 'HERMENEUTICAL' NOTION OF ANTHROPOLOGICAL INQUIRY

The descriptive science of fire might be satisfied with rendering thin descriptions because it does not have to take a context into account. The manner in which fire burns, whether in Greece or in Persia, does not in any way depend on what men here and there think of it. On the other hand, a knowledge of mores will note that the rights of the Greeks are not those of the Persians. Law currently in force is a function of the opinion of men concerning right and wrong. The facts with which the knowledge of mores concerns itself cannot be detached from what the players think about them. Since these facts cannot be 'objectified', the science of mores is a 'hermeneutical' science. The 'facts of observation' do not reveal their significance in and of themselves: the investigator must make them speak, must interpret them, just as the critic does who decides to read his text in such and such a context. Anthropology has a hermeneutical status, which simply means that the cognitive processes asked of a researcher studying a custom or a social form of life are strictly identical to those of an interpreter, that is to say, not simply a translator, but rather a literary critic writing an essay on *King Oedipus* or on an idea such as *A roll of the dice will never abolish chance*.

Continuing this reasoning, one will say that all the researcher's notes, if they have the slightest anthropological import, are interpretations on his part. But one then sees what has happened. We started from a distinction between thin descriptions and thick descriptions depending on whether the vocabulary in which they are given is poor or rich in cultural terms. However, we finally end up at the idea that there is very little of description – and perhaps none at all – in the 'material' that the investigator will be seeking in the field.

It is impossible not to wonder here whether the notion of thick description is not utilized as an equivalent (less openly contradictory) of 'subjective description'. In the combination 'thick description', the adjective could well contradict the noun, but without openly admitting to the conflict of the descriptive ideal and the interpretive means. In fact, the anthropologist will find it difficult to give up the idea that his work is of a descriptive nature. Why would there be inquiry on site, study in the 'field', if not to provide an empirical basis for the research? Furthermore, the ethnographer prides himself in practicing a universalist science: he does not go in the field to deliver judgments or to reform, but precisely *to learn* how people live and what they say about themselves. He is driven by all this to introduce himself as the practitioner of a descriptive discipline.

The adjective 'thick' comes in to temper a bit this ambition of scientific objectivity. To say that ethnographers do not practice observation, as do their naturalist colleagues, but rather thick description, is first of all (at least at first reading) simply a way of recognizing that anthropological description takes place under special conditions. One imagines that he has perhaps retained the descriptive status of the inquiry, all the while doing his part in the interpretive aspect of the process.

But in what way are the conditions of the analysis special? Many anthropologists today appear ready to say that description is special in that it can never limit itself to facts. Such is precisely the direction chosen by Geertz. In the final analysis, he explains, description is necessarily a construction, the fruit of the active imagination of the researcher (Geertz, 1973: 15). What remains of the descriptive if one grants an epistemological immunity to the version of facts proposed by the ethnographer? Nothing at all! The one who says *description* says factual truth and the possibility (theoretically) of an empirical truth. On the other hand, a hermeneutical discipline comes under other criteria of judgment.

THICK DESCRIPTION AND THIN DESCRIPTION

In the chapter which serves as a manifesto and which opens his work on *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Geertz proceeds with the fusion of two themes borrowed from very different traditions. The first is that of a hermeneutical status of the humanities (he returns to the idea, put forward by Ricoeur, according to which the art of reading a classical text could serve as a model for human knowledge). The second is that of a contrast between the 'thin' description or the purely factual nature of an action and its 'thick' description or that enriched by contextual elements (he borrows this distinction from Gilbert Ryle). Geertz, in this chapter, sets out to defend two theses simultaneously and to support one by the other: the ethnographer undertakes thick description (Geertz, 1973: 9–10) and never leaves the sphere of interpretation, because what he finds in his field is formed by interpretation; that which he brings with him to the field are models or diagrams for the interpretation (Geertz, 1973: 28).

How does the merging of the two themes take place? We will turn first to the way in which Ryle introduces, in his own words, the idea of *thick description*. Ryle appeals to the contrast between two types of description in articles devoted to the activity of thought (see 'Thinking and Reflecting' and 'The Thinking of Thoughts: What is *Le Penseur* Doing?' Ryle, 1971). How will the author of *The Concept of Mind*, known for having taken on the 'ghost in the machine', characterize the activity of thinking?

In a style typically Rylarian, the articles invite us to consider the character of Rodin's *Thinker* and to ask ourselves how we would describe his *activity*. The answer will be sought in a difference between two meanings of the verb 'to think': the thought of someone who is thinking about what he is doing, as, for example, a tennis player who is concentrating on his game, and the thought of someone who does nothing but reflect and who, seen from the outside, might seem altogether distracted. So Ryle is in the process of seeking a form of expression that a phenomenologist would render as follows: the active man is a thinker in so far as he is present at his task; the man who reflects is thoughtful, he is detached from immediate circumstances and thus capable of being present at other tasks or for other problems or beings other than those which give themselves to him in the form of a close or urgent presence. In order to arrive at the

distinction he is seeking, Ryle is trying to make clear the idea that, in one case (that of the tennis player), thinking functions in the way in which a physical activity is performed (in distracted or attentive fashion), while in the other case (that of Rodin's *Thinker*), thinking is the principal activity (an activity which itself can be described in different ways: concentrated, intense, prolonged, and so on).

What interests us here is not the attempt to give a non-Cartesian definition of thinking, but the distinction for which thinking is the occasion: that between 'thin' description and 'thick' description. As we are going to see, this latter distinction between two types of description rests on the contrast which has just been made between a subject whose activity thinking describes (the tennis player) and a subject for whom thinking is the principal activity (the *Thinker*). The difference which Ryle seeks to bring out is, therefore, the metaphysical difference between an action and its mode of execution. Or again, if one prefers, the grammatical difference between a *main verb* and its *adverbs*.

The adjectives 'thin' and 'thick' may be understood by analogy with the composition of a sandwich (Ryle, 1971: 482): certain sandwiches, closer to the 'spread' of a social buffet than to a 'snack', offer only a fine layer of the foods which they hold together; others are built by the piling up of various layers of food, construction that can be so thick that it requires the use of knife and fork for whoever wishes to eat it. Thus it is that the North American 'club sandwich' is composed of three slices of soft bread between which one places two layers of meat (chicken or turkey), while between the bread and the meat one slips in lettuce, tomato and mayonnaise.

The difference between the two types of descriptions is introduced by way of the example of two boys: both wink, but the first one blinks because he is afflicted with a twitch, whereas the second one blinks in order to wink at his companion. There is, writes Ryle, a mode of description of these movements, which does not distinguish between the two: you can tell that the eyelid contracts without being able to tell whether it's an involuntary movement or a signal. At this level, disregarding the distinction between the involuntary and the voluntary makes for a description so 'thin' that one cannot tell which is a twitch and which is sending a signal.

What is the boy doing who is giving a signal? He contracts his eyelid in order to make a sign addressed to his companion, according to a code established between the two, hidden from the knowledge of those around them, in order to indicate something, and so forth. The description of the action has become 'thick'. Ryle next complicates matters by adding a third boy who also winks, but only in order to mimic the second one, and a fourth who parodies the third one. All this aims at bringing out an important distinction: the description of the boy's movement who winks intentionally can become complicated by the addition of new layers in the sandwich description, and yet, in this ever lengthening description, it is always about one and the same thing. The reality described is always the same: it's the act of winking.

Here Ryle thus gives his own version of an idea which is developed in several ways at that time.² It is in fact this same idea of descriptive pluralism that one encounters in the philosophy of action (Elizabeth Anscombe) and in the theory of speech acts (John Austin).

There are several ways of recounting what the boy is doing, but he is doing only one thing. In order to give the signal, the boy has to do no more than contract his eyelid: thus, the description 'give the signal' enriches our information, but it establishes nothing

more *in rebus* than that same thing which had been established by the description 'contract the eyelid'. The entire complexity is in the description: the boy does not have two tasks to carry out, but only one. He is not, says Ryle, like someone who all at once welcomes his aunt and pats her dog on the head (which is an example of coordinating two actions, and not the carrying out of one and the same action).

Having brought this point out, Ryle sketches out a little grammar of *verbs of doing* destined to account for the complexity of a thick description. The principle of this grammar is that certain verbs are verbs of doing in that they signify an autonomous action (or an activity), whereas others can only describe what the actor does. An example illustrates this difference of category. An officer cannot order a soldier to obey (without saying more): in order to give a command to a soldier, he must show him the thing to be done, for example, to lower his arms. It is impossible to do something which would be to obey and *only* to obey. Obedience is not an action that can be ordered independently. When the soldier lowers his arms in accordance with the order received, he obeys. Obeying, on the part of the soldier, is certainly not reduced to lowering his arms (for it is not enough, in order to obey a command, whatever it may be, to lower one's arms). But in this case, all the soldier has to do in order to obey the order to lower his arms is simply to lower his arms.

The difference, from the point of view of logical grammar, will therefore be between two categories of verbs, that of the main verbs (signifying autonomous actions) and of 'adverbial verbs'. This difference is understood in reference to the thick structure of the description: certain verbs are found on the first floor of the descriptive construction while others can only be found on the upper floors. Thus the verb 'to obey' can never serve to give the thin description of what the soldier does when he carries out an order. Ryle gathers together in a class of 'constituently adverbial verbs' all those verbs which can never enter into a thin description of the activity: these verbs correspond to someone's action on the condition that another verb can specify, in a thin description, what the agent does. The distribution of the verbs between the two categories is thus a matter of internal relationships (Ryle, 1971: 483). Ryle explains what he means by 'internal relationships' in terms close to those of Wittgenstein. There are lessons that are not possible to learn if one has not been through previous classes. A child cannot know what theft is if he has not already learned what property is. An instructor cannot correct mistakes in calculus if he has not first learned how to calculate. These necessities are not epistemological, they are logico-philosophical (metaphysical).

FROM DESCRIPTION TO INTERPRETATION

According to Geertz, Ryle's brief analysis allows locating the object of ethnography: there are 'meaningful structures' which claim that winks, signals, antics or exercises are products, perceived as such and interpreted. He writes more precisely: 'a stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures' (Geertz, 1973: 7). According to him, the interest of the analysis proposed by Ryle is to show how inferences and implications pile up, a factor which will be able to change a simple gesture into a complicated signal.

In his chapter, Geertz returns to Ryle's little example and he singles out that difference between the facial twitch and the wink. The wink, from the point of view of a simple observer, is indiscernible from a facial twitch. But the ethnographer's work does not resemble that of an observer precisely because he would have nothing to conclude

from a simple movement (like the facial twitch). He is always dealing with meaning (like the wink) and even winks which point to other signals – a spate of them.³ The corporal movement, as soon as it becomes pertinent for the ethnographer, becomes part of a thick description. Between the physical reality of the eyelid which contracts and that which the ethnographer is going to record in his field notebook, there is an entire thickness of meanings allowing this physical event to be entered into a cultural category.

Until now, Geertz seems to be inviting us to make use of the analytical tool to *structuralist* ends. Studying a culture is to study the ‘codes’ or the ‘structures’ by virtue of which the events of everyday life are loaded with more or less wide-ranging meanings. There has not yet been a reference to interpretation in the hermeneutical sense of the term, that is to say, interpretation of a reading that is based on the radical decision of the reader. But more precisely, Geertz goes beyond Ryle’s introduction of the thick description. The latter’s analysis focuses on an artificial example: it is a ‘little story’ of an Oxford philosopher. We are too far from the ethnographical investigation and still more so from questions of hermeneutics. Geertz therefore provides an extract from his own field notebook in Morocco in order to have us understand the pertinence of this idea of a piling up, one upon the other, of ‘structures of meaning’.

The incident that Geertz reports dates from 1912. It takes place in a mountainous part of Morocco (the region of Marmusha). At that time, the French forces were in the process of establishing themselves in Morocco, but were far from controlling the entire territory. The story presents three groups of players: Jewish merchants, Berbers, and finally the French Foreign Legion. In the narration put together by Geertz from his informant, there are four acts.

Act I: The merchant Cohen is the victim of aggression and a theft perpetrated by prowlers belonging to a neighboring Berber tribe. Two other Jewish merchants are killed. Cohen manages to escape.

Act II: Cohen goes to the French captain Dumari and declares to him his intention of asking for compensation due him according to the traditional system of justice. But the tribe to which the guilty parties belong has not been subjugated. Captain Dumari does not wish to get involved needlessly and does not authorize Cohen to have recourse to the justice of the traditional chief of the place (the *sheikh* of the city of Marmusha), but he does not prohibit him from pursuing his claim. ‘If you want to get yourself killed, that’s your business.’

Act III: The traditional chief, once informed by Cohen, puts in place an expedition in accordance with their customs. The armed group goes into the territory of the neighboring tribe, takes the shepherd of the tribe prisoner and seizes his flock of sheep. They’re on the verge of engaging in battle, but decide to negotiate. The wrong done to Cohen is acknowledged and a fair compensation is granted him. Cohen chooses the sheep which are due him, in accordance with the traditional rules, by way of compensation.

Act IV: Cohen returns to Marmusha with the sheep. The French understand nothing about this and believe him to be in league with the Berber rebels. They confiscate the sheep and put Cohen in prison. Finally, the unfortunate Cohen manages to get out of prison but fails to recover his sheep.

THE CONFLICT OF INTERPRETATIONS

Geertz offers us this little account as an illustration of the thesis he is in the process of defending: that the ethnographical description is always thick and that the interpretations of the players, in addition to facts and observable gestures, always enter into it. He also talks about 'constructions':⁴ reporting whatever event – for example, the aforementioned incident – is in reality reporting the way in which someone in particular (here, Cohen) understood what happened; it is also reporting the interpretation which someone gives of the way in which the other protagonists have understood or interpreted the entire incident. If the ethnographer can himself believe, more or less, or make his reader believe that he is dealing with 'raw facts', it is only because he began by adopting, without saying it and perhaps without realizing it himself, a unique system of interpretation.

But where is the relationship between the Moroccan incident and Ryle's example? Geertz himself indicates an important difference: the two boys, in the philosopher's example, have a code, which they are using to communicate, whereas the Marmusha players have instead 'frames of interpretation' which enter into conflict. At Oxford, one is understood without having to spell it out, and even without speaking, by a simple wink. In that part of Morocco in 1912, things are more complicated: everything must be explained and, in addition, the explanations themselves are not, in the end, entirely understood by the actors in the scene. At bottom, Cohen's misadventure applies to a 'babelian' situation, to a 'confusion of tongues' (Geertz, 1973: 9). The poor soul does not know which authority to appeal to. If he lodges his complaint with the French authorities, they declare themselves incapable of acting. If he turns towards the traditional Berber authority, the latter enters into action in satisfactory fashion as long as things take place far from the French fort. But as soon as he returns to the city, the colonial power reasserts its authority.

Upon replacing the scholarly example of Ryle with the more dramatic adventure of the merchant Cohen, Geertz has tried to show that the ethnologist, just like the literary critic, is engaged in a hermeneutical activity. He is not dealing with clearly identifiable facts but with accounts and interpretations. Everything takes place as if he had an old palimpsest covered with marks and that he was obliged, by means of interpretation, to restore its meaning; and of course, to discern what comes from the source, what has been added or left out by the copyist, what glosses have been added by a biased commentator, and so on (Geertz, 1973: 10).

Along the way, we have really passed from thick descriptions, in Ryle's meaning, to hermeneutical interpretations. Geertz perhaps considers that he has satisfied himself in adapting Ryle's analysis to the working conditions of an ethnologist: the thick description, when practiced on another culture, takes the form of a hermeneutical interpretation. But, in reality, the change of example had the effect of turning the meaning of 'thick description' on its head. With Ryle, thick description assumes thin description: there could not be upper floors without the ground floor, a ham sandwich without bread, adverbial verbs without main verbs. With Geertz, concerned about combating the positivist prejudices regarding the 'raw fact' and the 'data of observation', ethnography is only thick description. Thus, one has first passed from a distinction between two types of description to a distinction between pure description and description mingled with interpretation, in order to finally arrive at the good old-fashioned opposition at the core

of hermeneutical philosophy between, on the one hand, the description of facts and, on the other, the interpretation of meanings.

It is true that Ryle's example has something narrow and insular about it. He evokes irresistibly a universe of boarding school and scout games. The entire scene is immersed in an atmosphere of great cultural homogeneity, not only between the different boys, but also between the players and the observer who piles up adverbs and thick description. This is why Ryle does not encounter, at any point, anything that would lead him to pose the 'hermeneutical problem'.

For his part, Geertz has taken care to choose as a typical example a babelian scene of crisis. The merchant Cohen does not know which way to turn, but it is not because he lacks the resources to understand or to make himself understood; it is rather because the situation in which he finds himself renders impossible any compensation for the wrong done to him. The French authorities do not want to concede to the local authorities any role in the administration of justice, but are not yet capable of exercising total control themselves. In such a state of things, it is impossible for Cohen to explain what has happened to him in such a way as to lay claim to his rights.

One cannot therefore say that Geertz has sketched out here the ethnographical description of an institution or of a life form. It is rather, in this particular case, clearly a situation where an institution of traditional justice is prevented from functioning by the intervention of the French, yet without being replaced by another system. On the other hand, when Geertz explains to us how the traditional system of the penal code functioned, he does it by referring back to the period when this system was actually in force: he tells us how things would *normally* have happened before the arrival of the French.

The misadventure of the merchant Cohen from Marmusha is due to the confusion of tongues. But the very notion of a confusion of tongues assumes that there are different languages, not 'interpretations' as numerous as individuals. In order for there to be a babelian misunderstanding (between Cohen and the Legion captain), it must be true that, in other circumstances, people normally make themselves understood in their respective tongues. This is precisely because a person normally makes himself understood when he expresses himself in his language; thus there is a situation of *confusion of tongues* when people perceive that they are not being understood. If the confusion of tongues were the norm, this would mean that, as a general rule, one is not being understood, even when one believes oneself to be understood. That would amount to saying that one is understood just as well (or as poorly) when one is not being understood as when one believes oneself to be understood, and that the feeling of a particular confusion, tied to the irruption of foreign groups in the same territory, only manifests a normal state of overall misunderstanding. Finally, a radical thesis on the babelian character of communication as such must maintain that there is really no difference between understanding and misunderstanding.⁵ In order to escape this contradiction, it is therefore necessary to maintain that the diagnostic of confusion of tongues must form a sharp contrast to the normal state of communication. It is not enough that there be several languages for one to be in a babelian situation: there must be several in number while one was expecting that there be only one.

DESCRIPTIVE VALUE OF THICK DESCRIPTIONS

Ryle would ask, what distinguishes the upper floors from the description of the ground floor? One would be mistaken to understand this range of levels in an epistemological sense. The difference is not that one would find observations in due form on the ground floor, the upper floors being reserved for personal glosses, for interpretations, for subjective perspectives. In fact, the difference is that on the ground floor, description is of the most rudimentary nature: it must consist of a *main verb* but not of *adverbial* details. Adverbs are not qualifications or additions made by the interpreter in order to report on his reactions or his hypotheses on the process being observed. A description in the form of *verb + adverb* is thicker than a description reduced to a main verb, but it is no less descriptive thereof. Example: 'The child eats his soup reluctantly' is no less descriptive nor more interpretive than 'The child eats his soup'.

With Ryle everything points to the idea of a *system* to be elucidated. Among the adverbial verbs of which he makes a list, one discerns three principal groups, which correspond to three ways of discovering an intelligible order within an intentional act. The first two groups correspond to individual actions, the third group comprises actions that have a social nature, a factor which introduces a particular problem.

1. There is, first of all, the order of a *practical syllogism*: how is a boy going to behave in order to communicate information to his companion? He will do it, in conformity to their code, by winking. 'Winking' is the means of the act of communicating and, therefore, from the point of view of practical reasoning, it is the gerund clause 'by winking' that serves as the adverb of the main verb 'to show that the teacher is coming in'. But, from the point of view of the action itself, things are reversed: that which the boy must do to communicate is the action described at the thinnest level. (The more one describes the means put into play, the more one descends on the descriptive scale, since specifying the means employed is to add an adverbial phrase of means. The more one points to the end, all the while setting aside, if not the means, then at least their materiality, the more one places oneself on a higher plane.)
2. Moreover, Ryle proposes several examples that belong to a group of activities which one can gather under the name of exercises (preparations, training, demonstrations of putting one's ability to the test). Here, someone will make a gesture to improve his performance, or to show that he knows what he is doing or how he must act. For example, the movements of a tennis player who is practicing repetitive service movements are exactly (or preferably) those which the player makes during a game, but there is the added complication that these movements are being carried out with the idea in mind of acquiring a skill (or attaining a higher level of a skill). The logical relationship is thus the following: one can carry out an act for its own sake (and not in order to practice), but one cannot train oneself to succeed in an action without undertaking that action.
3. Finally, a certain number of these examples remind us that there is a logic to social acts. In order to obey the command to lower his arms, the soldier has only to do one thing: lower his arms. The description 'to obey' doesn't enter into competition with the description 'to lower the arms', nor is the former added to the latter (as if

the soldier had to do both things, lower his arms and obey). The two descriptions must be arranged on different levels.

This analysis of Ryle's, it seems to me, is convincing. One could illustrate it by the following distinction. An officer gives a soldier the order to undertake a certain action (dig a hole). The soldier does it. He does it by command. Let us suppose that he does it rapidly. From the logical point of view, we will make the distinction between carrying out the order of *doing A rapidly* and *rapidly carrying out* the order to do A. This distinction could be expressed with the help of parentheses indicating in which order the adverbs come in the sentence. In the case where the soldier hurries to carry out the order received, the description of his action will take the form: RAPIDLY (by command [to do A]). In the other case, where the order was to do A rapidly, we will have a description of the form: BY COMMAND (rapidly [do A]).

Thus we clearly have two different descriptions, two different types of behavior, the distinction being marked by the order in which the adverbs come in the sentence. Or, if one prefers, by the level that they occupy in the composition of the 'sandwich'.

The conclusion that emerges from the parallel between Ryle's analysis and that of Geertz is now clear. If we retain for the term 'thick description' the meaning that it has for Ryle, then it is undeniable that, under the conditions described by Geertz, there is no place to speak of thick description, any more than of thin description. This distinction, with Ryle, introduces the idea of a *logical* order of descriptions, of an *intelligible* organization: I can obey the order to lower my arms only by lowering my arms, not by doing something which would be and only be to obey. As for Geertz, he is interested in the *complication* of his material, but this complication contains nothing of a *logical complexity*: no system is able to arrange in order the actions of the Jewish merchant, the sheikh and the French captain. There is disorder from the historical point of view. The Jewish merchant wishes to see justice rendered to him. When his complaint is understood according to one of the rival systems and a fair compensation is given him, he discovers that this is understood, according to another system, as a breach of law. The plurality which Geertz draws from his account is a conflict of antagonistic interpretations, not an order of descriptions linked to one other by internal relationships.

Thus is Geertz poles apart from the philosophy of action which he has cited: the problem he wishes to pose, and the conceptual tools which he wants to allow himself, have nothing to do with the distinction between the main verb and the adverb. But this distinction suffices to render incoherent the idea that the hermeneutical ethnographer is dealing with description. Since he does not deal with thin description, neither does he deal with thick description, for the two go hand in hand. Since all meanings are added by the witnesses or the informants, one never manages to know what the significance of the gesture was. In Ryle's example, the significance of the wink is in the wink: there is, by virtue of the code, a value in the message of the gesture. The significance is not only an 'hypothesis' that the observer would fabricate to 'interpret' data. If the observer does not *see* that the gesture has meaning, the fact is that he does not see what is going on before his very eyes; he has been kept in the dark with regard to the two boys' secret code.

Is this to say that the anthropologist, if he intends to do descriptive work, could practice the art of thick description in Ryle's sense of the term without having to embrace

the doctrines of hermeneutics? I believe so, with one small reservation. What the anthropologist could retain of Ryle is the idea of the *complexity* of the description *as* system. The analysis of the Oxford don should hold the attention of the anthropologists who call upon Mauss and who have kept the idea according to which the inquiry must attempt to grasp 'total social phenomena'. As is proper, the don took for an example a little scene, a minuscule, isolated episode. However, if one had to describe a complete social phenomenon (as Geertz did with his famous analysis of the Balinese cockfight), one would encounter the problem of putting in order the various dimensions of the phenomenon to be studied. It is then that the idea of an order, following the model of the introduction of adverbs in a simple sentence, can be of use. Not that an anthropological description must necessarily adopt purely and simply a logico-grammatical model. It remains that the problem arises for the investigator to not confine himself to a multiplication of 'points of view' and of 'aspects', but to find an articulation, an order, in this plurality. To speak of thick description here would be to show that description must not only be multidimensional, but that it must also be organized according to levels, along the lines of Ryle's 'sandwich'.

There is, however, one qualification to be made about the analysis that Ryle proposes for his example. Geertz was correct in denouncing the following bias: one should, in order to pile up meanings upon one another, first allow oneself an impeccably positive description. Now what Ryle suggests is as follows: the thin description appears to be for him a description which could be accepted by a psychologist of behaviorist persuasion.

Ryle acts as if all 'intentional' or 'semantic' description were the *redescription* of an observable movement. Here he gives in to a well-known temptation, that of considering that the perception of human behavior begins with raw facts (the *behavior*) and that it is then built on this positive basis.

If Ryle remains, in this case, a prisoner of a certain behaviorism, that is no doubt explained by his concern to exclude dualism. His entire analysis aims at driving home the point: someone who intentionally undertakes an action does not do two things at once, on the one hand a sequence of body movements and on the other, a mental act (that of targeting a goal or of desiring a result). There is only one thing done. Ryle's perspective is therefore a critique of the myth of volitions.⁶ His critique is altogether effective and there is no reason to return to this point.

This in no way means that we can give 'thin descriptions' only on terms acceptable to a behavioral psychologist. Ryle, among the examples he gives of a thick description of action, cites the case of someone who obeys an order. The main verb is going to state what was to be done, the adverbial details will tell in what way it is done (in this instance, the action is performed in compliance with the order received). The main verb is therefore going to correspond to the content of the order given by the officer. But it goes without saying that the officers are not thus limited to ordering exclusively corporal movements. It is even likely that most of the orders focus on intentional acts. For example, the soldier is sent ahead to scout around and must return in order to tell if there is anything to be reported. The description 'Go and see if there is anything to be reported' is thin (it can appear on the ground floor), but it comprises an obviously logical complexity which prevents seeing in it the reading of a natural movement (as opposed to an intentional action).

One will note that the example of the wink, by its excessive simplicity, has the

disadvantage of favoring the illusion of a word-for-word correlation between human action and observable behavior. The peculiarity of giving the agreed upon signal by winking is that such an action is very economical: giving such a signal takes very little time since this is done precisely 'in a wink of the eye', the time needed to wink.

The simplicity of the bodily movement of which the action of giving the signal consists is a characteristic feature of this particular example. As soon as one turns to other examples, 'la belle correspondance' between a simple movement of the body and an action disappears. This takes nothing away from the physical reality of the action and thus does not affect in any way what Ryle is attempting to establish (in his antidualist crusade): to wink voluntarily, there is nothing more to do on the part of the subject than to wink (at the moment chosen by him). Similarly, in order to go from Paris to Lyon, the subject has nothing more to accomplish than the movement of going from Paris to Lyon (by such and such a means). Nevertheless, in this second example, the voluntary act does not consist of an elementary gesture but of an orderly, complex sequence of gestures (which are themselves complex). It follows that the 'thin' description of a journey to Lyon will have nothing of behaviorism.

Geertz was therefore wrong to say that ethnography was only thick description. To eliminate thin description from the palette of which the ethnographer avails himself is to abolish the contrast between the thin and the thick. This hermeneutical radicalization renders inapplicable the idea of an organized complexity of levels of description. Nevertheless, Geertz was right in pointing out that the ethnographer did not have to build his thick description on a *hard rock* composed of descriptions wholly decontextualized. In the notebook where the ethnographer records his 'field observations', there will be no behaviorist readings.

AN IMPROPER SEMIOTIC

Geertz says that cultural anthropology need not claim to aim for a consensus – even partial or provisional – but that it can do no better than render more 'refined' the terms of the disagreement (Geertz, 1973: 297). It is then a question of a conflict between anthropologists. But, oddly enough, this 'hermeneutical' conception of the discipline finds its counterpart in the definition of its object. Geertz is not far from giving his characters' confrontation the appearance of a confusing dialogue between visions of the world foreign to one another, as if the protagonists which he puts on stage were the representatives of three traditions who would meet in order to reflect together on the essence of justice.⁷ The definition which he assigns to the ethnographical activity changes the incident that he reports into a sort of philosophical symposium between a Jew, a Berber and a legionnaire: all three have an idea of criminal justice, but it is not the same.

Thus Geertz, guided perhaps by the example of the boys who send each other signals back and forth, proceeds to a *semiotization* of the whole incident which he has reported in his field notebook. Each group gives a speech in its own tongue, in which it affirms the validity of its point of view: Cohen considers that he has the right to compensation, the sheikh wishes to maintain his authority and the French desire to establish theirs. According to Geertz, the whole constitutes a 'social discourse' in several languages (Geertz, 1973: 18). However, since the confusion of tongues reigns, one could speak more precisely of a brouhaha⁸ than of a discourse.

In fact, this incident illustrates rather clearly *the absence* of a social discourse common

to all the protagonists. To persist in speaking of 'social discourse' in such a situation is to leave us with the understanding that it has, in fact, always been thus, that when people speak to one another in the same tongue, in fact everything happens as if they were speaking to one another in different tongues.

In order for the object of anthropological inquiry to be presented as the analogue of a text, we must transform the protagonists of an action into interlocutors of a social discourse. In order for the thick description to be a hermeneutical activity, its thickness must not have descriptive value, strictly speaking. These are the two symptoms of one and the same difficulty, that of linking together the analytical philosophy of action and hermeneutical phenomenology.

Notes

- 1 One understands generally by 'hermeneutical problem' the point of knowing if we have reasons to interpret a sign as we do, whereas: (1) there are in reality other interpretations possible and, among them, other interpretations actually forbidden by other traditions and other sects; (2) the solution proposed could not claim to be *true*, as if there were only one single correct interpretation (that is excluded beforehand by the 'universality of the hermeneutical situation', or if one prefers, by the very constitution of language, of history and of human existence). Certain hermeneutical philosophers respond to this problem by sending us back to our radical personal choice (these are the heirs of existentialism); others tell us that, in practice, we don't have a choice, for we must take as a starting point the interpretation which is imposed upon us by the fact of our belonging to a particular historical tradition (whether we accept it or contest it).
- 2 One really could not say that Ryle is borrowing this idea from others, for his entire book on *The Concept of Mind* develops the idea according to which certain psychological verbs, far from signifying extra deeds achieved by the subject, indicate rather the way in which he does what he does. For example, the candidate who rereads his copy and who pays attention in order to discover the mistakes that might have slipped in, is not someone who does two things; he is someone who does one thing – the reading of the copy – and who does it very carefully. Someone who gives an intelligent answer is not someone who does two things (answer, be intelligent); it is someone who does one thing intelligently. Thus do we rediscover the insightful Rylean idea of an *adverbial* status of intelligence, of awareness, of attention, and more generally, of verbs of thought.
- 3 'Winks upon winks upon winks', writes Geertz (1973: 9).
- 4 In English, the notion of 'grammatical construction' is used more liberally than in French. One speaks not only of constructing the entire sentence according to such and such a word order (in order to render it word for word), but also of constructing a word according to a certain syntax, and especially of constructing the meaning of the sentence, which is the equivalent of giving one such and such an interpretation.
- 5 Here one cannot help thinking about what Baudelaire wrote: 'The world works only by misunderstanding – it's by universal misunderstanding that the world gets along. For if, as ill luck would have it, one was understood, one could never be in agreement' (Baudelaire, 1863, no. 42). But, unlike the 'post-structuralists' and the 'post-modernists', in no way does Baudelaire confuse the two senses in which people can *get along* between themselves: only understanding each other, or rather agreeing.

- 6 One understands by 'volition' that mental event which the subject is supposed to live, or produce, in order to give rise to voluntary movements of his body.
- 7 In reality, the misunderstanding especially affects the relationship between the colonial power and the local communities. The account of the incident shows that the latter had found the paths to coexistence within a like order of justice.
- 8 It is a matter of no small importance to note that, according to one of the proposed etymologies, the word 'brouhaha' would be the 'onomatopoeic deformation of the Hebraic formula *baruk habba*, "blessed be he who comes" (in the name of the Lord), Psalm 113' (Bloch and von Wartburg, 1975).

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