Historical bodies and historical space

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1. Introduction

Ethnography is a strange animal. On the one hand, it is undoubtedly the success story of anthropology *par excellence*. It is the only anthropological development that has made it into mainstream social science; it is treated with respect by scholars in fields as widely apart as linguistics, psychology and history. One of us was recently invited to write a piece in which ethnography figured prominently for a methods handbook in criminology. On the other hand, though, ethnography has always had a doubtful reputation as well. It was under-theorized, relied too heavily on subjectivity, and consequently produced data that did not stand the tests of a more rigid interpretation of objectivity in science. While there is now a growing body of fundamental methodological reflection on ethnography (e.g. Fabian 1983, 2001, 2008, Hymes 1996), this body of theory is relatively recent, and its insights have not made it into the mainstream yet. The upshot of this is that much of what comes under the label of ethnography (including textbook introductions to it) lacks theoretical and methodological sophistication and is exposed to the same age-old criticism – a nasty experience shared by many a PhD student who tries to argue in favour of ethnography in his or her dissertation proposal.

Theoretically sophisticated ethnography is rare, and it takes an effort to discover it, because sometimes it is found in work that does not announce or present itself as 'typical' ethnography (the fieldwork-based monograph is still the 'typical' ethnographic product). The work of Ron and Suzie Scollon is a case in point. Much of their major works do not *look* like ethnography. There are no lengthy introductions about the fieldwork which was conducted, for instance, and the main drive of their work is to contribute to semiotics and discourse analysis. Yet, they systematically insisted on the ethnographic basis of their work (e.g. Scollon & Scollon 2009). And this paper will argue that their work contains very useful, even momentous, interventions in ethnographic theory and method. If we talk about sophisticated ethnography, the work of the Scollons certainly qualifies for inclusion into that category. We will focus in particular on two efforts by the Scollons: *Nexus Analysis* (2004) and *Discourses*

in Place (2003); we will try to show that both works contain and articulate a theoretical overture towards history – an overture we find of major importance for ethnographic theory and method. The works do that, respectively, by means of a theorization of embodiment in the notion of 'the historical body', and by a theorization of space as agentive and non-neutral. Taken together, these two interventions offer us a key ingredient necessary for transcending the danger of localism and anecdotism in ethnography, by allowing ethnography to move from the uniquely situated events it describes to structural and systemic regularities in interpretation. This has implications for ethnography, to be sure, but also for a broader field of studies of human conduct, including linguistics and sociolinguistics. Before moving on to discuss the two interventions by the Scollons, we first need to formulate the problem more precisely.

2. The problem of synchrony

The main problem of ethnography, identified close to three decades ago by Johannes Fabian (1983), can be summarized as follows. Ethnography, typically, depends on data drawn from human encounters in real space and time. The ethnographer and his/her 'informant' interact, like all humans, in a contextually specific space-time which (as decades of research in pragmatics have taught us) defines the outcome of such interactions. The outcome is, typically, an epistemically genred collection of texts: recordings, fieldnotes, and later a paper or a monograph. Ethnographers walk away from the field with a collection of such texts, and these texts bear witness to the contextual conditions under which they were constructed. Concretely: phonetic descriptions of a language can differ when the informant misses both front teeth from when the informant has a fully intact set of them. It will also differ when the ethnographer had access to a sophisticated digital recording device for collecting the data, from when he or she had to rely solely on one's ear and competence in the use of the phonetic alphabet. Or: a narrative account of a robbery will differ depending on whether the narrator was the victim, the perpetrator, or a witness of the robbery. And of course it will differ when the ethnographer him- or herself was involved in such roles in the robbery. The point is that ethnography draws its 'data' from real-world moments of intersubjective exchange in which the ethnographer and the informant are both sensitive to the contextual conditions of this exchange (see also Bourdieu 2004; Blommaert 2005a).

The problem is, however, that as soon as the ethnographer tries to present his or her findings as 'science' – as soon as the 'data' enter the genre-machines of academic writing, in

other words – this fundamental contextual sharedness is lost, and replaced by a discursively constructed distance between the ethnographer and his or her 'object'. The sharedness of time and space, of language and of event structure gives way to a unidirectional, textual relationship in which the ethnographer is no longer an *interlocutor* alongside the informant, but a detached, 'objective' voice who does not talk with the interlocutor but *about* him or her. This problem is particularly acute when the ethnographer tries to generalize, i.e. use his or her data to make claims of general validity, of the type "the Bamileke are matrilinear". Fabian observes how in such textual moves, the timeless present tense is preferred over a discourse that represents this knowledge as situational and context-dependent. He notes that "the present tense 'freezes' a society at the time of observation" (1983: 81) and detaches ethnographic knowledge from the dialogical and context-sensitive frame in which it was constructed. The shared time-space in which it emerged is erased and replaced by a timeless present – something that Fabian calls the 'denial of coevalness' and identifies as a major epistemological problem hampering any ethnographic claim to general validity and generalization (see also Bourdieu 2004).

This introduction of the timeless present is, of course, a widespread practice in the textual politics of scientific generalization and abstraction. It is central to what is known as 'synchronic' analysis in structural linguistics, mainstream sociolinguistics and discourse analysis, structuralist and functionalist anthropology and so forth. And in all of these disciplines, we encounter the same fundamental epistemological problem: as soon as scholars try to address structural or systemic features of a society, they have to shift from real time into abstract time, they have to extract features of dynamic lived experience and place them at a timeless, static plane of general validity. Whatever makes data social and cultural – their situatedness in social and cultural processes and histories – disappears and is replaced by 'laws' and 'rules' that appear to have a validity which is not contextually sensitive. We are familiar with this move in structural linguistics, where notably the development of modern phonology in the early 20th century made 'synchrony' into the level at which scientific generalization of linguistic facts needed to be made. Michael Silverstein concisely summarizes this move as follows:

> "Late in the 19th century, linguistics as a field transformed itself from a science focused on language change, the generalizations based on comparative and historical Indo-European, Semitic, Finno-Ugric, etc. At the center of such change was "phonetic law," and in seeking the causes for the "exceptionlessness" of phonetic changes,

scholars went both to the phonetics laboratory and to the dialectological and "exotic language" field. The important results of such study, certainly achieved by the 1920s, were: the postulation (or "discovery") of the phonemic principle of abstract, immanent classes of sound realized variably in actual phonetic articulation and audition; and the *synchronicization* of linguistic theory as the theory of phonological structure involving structured relationships among the abstract sounds or phonological segments of any language, a syntagmatic and paradigmatic structure of categories of sound." (Silverstein 2009: 14-15)

In this new Modern linguistics, sound *change* was replaced by sound *replacement.* For people such as Bloomfield, this discovery of 'elementary particles' (phonemes) and of synchrony as the level of linguistic abstraction was cause to claim fully scientific status for linguistics (id: 15). Science, for him and many others in the heyday of structuralism, was the art of generalization, of identifying the immobile, non-dynamic, non-contextual, non-accidental facts of language and social life. And this was done, precisely, by the elision of real time and real space from the purview of analysis. Analysis was synchronic, and to the extent that it was diachronic, the diachronicity of it rested on a sequenced juxtaposition and comparison of solidly synchronic states of affairs (Meeuwis & Brisard 1993). Such diachronicity, in short, was not (and can never be) *historical*. To go by the words of Edwin Ardener commenting on the Neogrammarian approach,

> "The grandeur of the Neogrammarian model for historical linguistics literally left nothing more to be said. This grandeur lay in its perfect generativeness. It did not, however, generate history" (Ardener 1971: 227)

History is time filled with social and cultural actions, not just chronology. A lot of historical linguistics is in that sense chronological linguistics, not historical at all. Time in itself does not inform us about social systems, about patterns and structures of human organization. What can, historically, be seen as systemic or structural features (i.e. features that define a particular social system in a particular period) becomes in this chronological and synchronic paradigm converted into permanencies, and hence into essences. Synchronicity therefore inevitably contains the seeds of essentialism.

The way to escape this trap is, one could argue, relatively simple: reintroduce history as a real category of analysis. The simplicity is, however, deceptive of course, for what is

required is a toolkit of concepts that are *intrinsically* historical; that is: concepts whose very nature and direction point towards connections between the past and the present in terms of *social* activities – concepts, in short, that define and explain synchronic social events in terms of their histories of becoming as social events. This is where we need to turn to the Scollons.

3. Historical bodies and historical space

Our branches of scholarship already have a number of such intrinsically historical concepts. Terms such as intertextuality, interdiscursivity and entextualization, especially in their rich Bakhtinian interpretation, explain the textual present in relation to textual histories – not just histories of textual 'stuff', but also histories of use, abuse and evaluation of textual materials (e.g. Bauman & Briggs 1990; Fairclough 1992; Silverstein & Urban 1996; Silverstein 2005; Blommaert 2005b; see Johnstone 2008: chapter 5 for a survey and discussion). Whenever we use a term such as 'bitch' in relation to a female subject, we are not only introducing a semantic history into this usage of the term – the transformation of the meaning of 'female dog' to 'unpleasant woman' – but also a pragmatic and metapragmatic history of the term – the fact that this term is used as an insult and should, consequently, not generally be used in public and formal performances. The extension to include a pragmatic and metapragmatic dimension to intertextual processes introduces a whole gamut of contextual factors into the analysis of intertextual processes. It's not just about borrowing and re-using 'texts' in the traditional sense of the term, it's about reshaping, reordering, reframing the text from one social world of usage into another one.

    Nexus Analysis started from a reflection on intertextuality. For the Scollons, human semiotic action could only be observed at the moment of occurrence, but needed to be analyzed in terms of 'cycles of discourse' (Scollon & Scollon 2004, chapter 2) – a term which Ron Scollon later replaced by 'discourse itineraries' (Scollon 2008). Such itineraries are trajectories of 'resemiotization', something which in turn relied on the Scollon's fundamental insight that discourse was always mediated (Scollon 2001) – it was never just 'text', but always human social action in a real world, full of people, objects, and technologies. Consequently, intertextuality needs to be broadly understood, for "the relationship of text to text, language to language, is not a direct relationship but is always mediated by the actions of social actors as well as through material objects in the world" (Scollon 2008: 233). And whenever we use words (and Scollon 2008 focuses on the term 'organic'), that use "encapsulates or resemiotizes an extended historical itinerary of action, practice, narrative,

authorization, certification, metonymization, objectivization and technologization or reification" (ibid). Changes in any of these processes and practices are changes to the discourse itself; even if the discourse itself remains apparently stable and unaltered, the material, social and cultural conditions under which it is produced and under which it emerges can change and affect what the discourse is and does. Discourse analysis, for the Scollons, revolves around the task "to map such itineraries of relationships among text, action, and the material world through what we call a 'nexus analysis'" (ibid). Such an analysis naturally shares a lot with Bakhtinian notions of intertextuality; at the same time it broadens the scope of the analysis by focusing on the interplay of the social and the material work in relation to discourse. And while intertextuality in the work of Fairclough and others still mainly addresses purely textual objects, the objects defined by the Scollons – nexuses – display far more complexity. A nexus is an intersection in real time and space of three different "aggregates of discourse":

> "the *discourses in place*, some social arrangement by which people come together in social groups (a meeting, a conversation, a chance contact, a queue) – the *interaction order*, and the life experiences of the individual social actors – the *historical body*." (Scollon & Scollon 2004: 19)

Discourse, as social action, emerges out of the nexus of these three forces, and an analysis of discourse consequently needs to take all three into consideration. To many, of course, this move is enough to recategorize the Scollons as semioticians rather than as discourse analysts. For the Scollons themselves, the ambition was to develop

> "a more general ethnographic theory and methodology which can be used to analyze the relationships between discourse and technology but also place this analysis in the broader context of the social, political and cultural issues of any particular time" (Scollon & Scollon 2004: 7)

Observe here how this ethnographic-theoretical ambition takes the methodological shape of *historical* analysis. So when the Scollon's talk about an ethnographically situated object – human action and practice – this object is historically generated, and the features of the synchronic object must be understood as historical. The three aggregates of discourse are all historical dimensions of any synchronic social action, and their historicity lies in the fact that

all three refer to histories of human action crystallizing into normative social patterns of conduct, expectation and evaluation – *traditions* in the anthropological sense of the term. Synchronic events, thus, display the traces of (and can only be understood by referring to) normative-traditional complexes of social action, resulting (in a very Bourdieuan sense) in habituated, 'normal' or 'normalized' codes for conduct. And these codes, then, are situated in three different areas: individual experience, skills and capacities (the historical body), social space (discourses in place) and patterned, genred interaction (the interaction order). The notion of 'interaction order' is attributed to Goffman (Scollon & Scollon 2004: 22). Yet, the actual meaning of that term and its use in *Nexus Analysis* is an amendment to Goffman's 'interaction order'. In order to see that we need to look at the two other notions: historical bodies and historical space.

We have seen above that the Scollons defined the historical body as "the life experiences of the individual social actors"; somewhat more explicitly, they also described it as people's "life experiences, their goals and purposes, and their unconscious ways of behaving and thinking" (id.: 46). Whenever people enter into social action, they bring along their own skills, experiences and competences, and this 'baggage', so to speak, conditions (and constraints) what they can do in social action. Historical bodies have been formed in particular social spaces and they represent, to use an older notion, the 'communicative competence' of people in such social spaces. Thus a teacher has grown accustomed to the school system, the actual school building where s/he works, his/her colleagues, the curriculum, the teaching materials and infrastructure, the ways of professionally organizing his/her work, academic discourse, the students. Various processes intersected in this: there is formal learning, there is informal learning, particular patterns are acquired while others are just encountered, certain skills are permanent while others are transitory, and so on. The end result of this, however, is that the teacher can enter a classroom and perform adequately – s/he knows exactly where the classroom is, what kinds of activities are expected there, and how to perform these activities adequately. The historical body of the teacher has been formed in such a way that s/he will be perceived as a teacher by others, and that most of the actual practices s/he performs can be habitual and routine. Precisely the habitual and routine character of these practices makes them – at a higher level of social structure – 'professional' (see Pachler et al 2008 for illustrations).

There is a long tradition of speaking about such things in relation to the mind; the Scollons, however, locate them in the body. What is actually perceived, and acted upon semiotically by other people is a body in a particular space. This body talks, and behind the

talking one can suspect thinking; but it also moves, manipulates objects, displays particular stances (aggression, tenderness, care, seriousness, etc). It is the Scollons' preference for material aspects of discourse that makes them choose the body rather than the mind as the locus for such individual experiences. But by doing so they open up a whole range of issues for the social study of language: issues of learning and acquisition in the semiotic field, questions about the way we appear to know what we know about signs and meanings. Until now, such questions have dominantly been answered by reference to the mind as well. The questions raised by a notion such as the historical body, however, shift the debate away from the mind and into the field of embodied knowledge. The gradual process by means of which teachers, for instance, acquire the habitual and routine practices and the knowledge to perform them adequately, cannot just be seen as a process of 'learning' in the traditional sense of the term. It is rather a process of *enskilment*: the step-by-step development, in an apprentice mode, of cultural knowledge through skilful activities (Gieser 2008, also Ingold 2000, Jackson 1989). Shared kinaesthetic experiences with social activities (and talking would be one of them) lead to shared understandings of such activities, and "meaning or knowledge is discovered in the very process of imitating another person's movements" (Gieser 2008: 300).

Consider now how the Scollons describe a sequence of actions in which a teacher hands a paper to the student. First, the teacher must approach the student with the paper, and the student needs to understand the proximity of the teacher, and his/her holding the paper in a particular way, as the beginning of a 'handing-the-paper' sequence. Both participants need to know these bodily routines of physical proximity, direction of movement, and manipulation of an object. Then,

> "the paper itself is handed through a long and practiced set of micro-movements that are adjusted to the weight of the object and the timing of the movements of their hands toward each other. Any very small failure of this timing and these movements and the object falls. This can easily lead to the embarrassment of the student or the teacher having to reach down to the floor to regain control of the paper" (Scollon & Scollon 2004: 64)

Observe how this moment of complex physical handling of the paper is *semiotic*: if it is done wrongly, embarrassment may ensue – there may be giggling from the class, blushing from the student and/or the teacher, muttered mutual apologies and so forth. The 'practiced set of micro-movements', therefore, is replete with semiotic signs and signals, and carries social

risks and rewards (making it, of course, a normative set: things have to be done in a particular way). It is embodied cultural knowledge – movements and positions of the body that convey cultural information, and have the shape of routine skills. And such movements have been 'practiced', they have a measure of immediate recognizability and they induce particular frames of action and understanding for all the participants. Whenever the Scollons discuss the ways in which students get used to keyboard-and-screen handling in a virtual learning environment, or seating arrangement and attention organization in traditional ('panoptical') classrooms, they emphasize the minute details of bodily practices – as acquired, *enskilled* forms of social conduct in a learning environment.

Through the notion of the historical body, thus, we see how a connection is made between semiotics and embodiment. Participants in social action bring their real bodies into play, but their bodies are semiotically enskilled: their movements and positions are central to the production of meaning, and are organized around normative patterns of conduct. And they do this, as we have seen, in a real spatial arena too. So let us consider historical space now.

As *Discourses in Place* (Scollon & Scollon 2003) makes abundantly clear, space is never a neutral canvass for the Scollons. The book is, in fact, one of the very rare profound and sophisticated problematizations of space in the field of sociolinguistics, and while the notion of 'discourses in place' re-emerges in *Nexus Analysis*, as we have seen, the treatment of space in *Discourses in Place* reads like a mature contribution to linguistic landscaping. While a lot of work of linguistic landscaping hardly questions the space in which linguistic signs appear, *Discourses in Place* develops a whole theory of signs in space ('geosemiotics'), revolving around notions such as 'emplacement' – the actual semiotic process that results from the specific location of signs in the material world. A 'no smoking' sign has this restrictive meaning only in the space where the sign is placed. So while the sign itself has a latent meaning, its meaning only becomes an actual social and semiotic fact when it is emplaced in a particular space. It is then that the sign becomes consequential: someone smoking in the vicinity of that sign can now be seen as a transgressor, someone who violates a rule clearly inscribed in that space. Emplacement, thus, adds a dimension of spatial scope to semiotic processes: it points towards the elementary fact that communication always takes place in a spatial arena, and that this spatial arena imposes its own rules, possibilities and restrictions on communication. Space, in that sense, is an *actor* in sociolinguistic processes (see also Blommaert et al 2005).

It is very often a *normative* actor in sociolinguistic processes, and this is where history enters the picture. There are expectations – normative expectations – about relationships

between signs and particular spaces. One expects certain signs in certain places: shop signs and publicity billboards in a shopping street, for instance, or train timetables in a railway station. We don't expect such timetables in a café or a restaurant. When signs are 'in place', so to speak, habitual interpretations of such signs can be made, because the signs fit almost ecologically into their spatial surroundings. When they are 'out of place', or 'transgressive' in the terminology of the Scollons (2003: 147), we need to perform additional interpretation work because a different kind of social signal has been given. In a shopping street, shop signs are in place, while graffiti is out of place. The former belong there, the latter doesn't, and its presence raises questions of ownership of the place, of legitimate use of the place, of the presence of 'deviant' groups of users in that place, and so on. So we attach to particular places a whole array of objects, phenomena, activities, and we do that in a normative sense, that is: we do it in a way that shapes our expectations of 'normalcy' in such places. We expect the people sitting in a university lecturing hall to be students, and we expect their behaviour to be that of students as well; we can have very flexible expectations with regard to what they wear and how they look, but we would have more restrictive expectations about the objects they bring into the lecturing hall (a student entering the hall with a shotgun would, for instance, be highly unexpected and, consequently, alarming). We also expect them to use certain types of speech and literacy resources during the lecture – and when all of that is in place, we feel that the lecture went 'normally'.

It is the connection between space and normative expectations that makes space historical, for the normative expectations we attach to spaces have their feet in the history of social and spatial arrangements in any society. The fact that we have these clear and widely shared expectations about university lecturing halls is not a synchronic phenomenon: it is something that belongs to the history of institutions. And getting acquainted to such histories is part of the processes of enskilment we discussed earlier. We have been enskilled in recognizing the nature of particular places, and we are able to act appropriately – that is 'normally – in such places. We now enter a lecturing hall, and we know exactly what to do and how to do it; we are instantly tuned into the patterns of normative expectations that belong to that place – for instance, silence from the students as soon as the lecturing starts – and we react accordingly when transgressive signs are being produced (as when a student's mobile phone goes off, or someone walks into the hall with a shotgun). An 'interaction order' falls into place, literally, as soon as we have entered that place and the place has been mutually recognized as such-and-such a place.

The historical body is, thus, narrowly connected to historical spaces: we get enskilled in the use of social and physical space, and our bodies fall into shape (or out of shape) each time we enter or leave a certain space. This, I believe, is the core of the Scollons' insistence on language in the material world: the material world is a spatial world, a real material environment full of objects, technologies and signs, upon which we act semiotically. Human semiotic behaviour, thus, is behaviour in real space, in relation and with reference to real space. The nexus of the historical body and of discourses in place is a historical, normative nexus, in which both dialectically generate the conditions for communication, its potential and its restrictions. The third element of the nexus triad, the 'interaction order', in that sense becomes something rather far removed from Goffman's initial formulations. The interaction order is *an effect* of the dialectics between the historical body and historical space. It is the actual order of communicative conduct that ensues from enskilled bodies in a space inscribed with particular conditions for communication. It has very little existence outside of it, and the three elements of the triad now form one ethnographic object of inquiry.

4. The zebra crossing

As an illustration of the way in which space is densely packed with several different discourses, and so form a 'semiotic aggregate', the Scollons (2003: 180-189) analyze a very mundane thing: crossing the street in five cities. In each of the cities, such places where pedestrians can cross are littered with signs, some for the traffic, some for the pedestrians and some for both; some directly related to the regulation of crossing the street and halting the traffic, some (e.g. shop signs) unrelated to it. Pedestrians must make sense of these multiple discourses, and such sense-making processes are part of the habitual routine practice of crossing a street. With the remarks made above in mind, we would now like to return to the example of crossing a street, focusing specifically on how the nexus triad should be seen as a historically shaped complex organizing everyday practices. We shall focus on one particular moment, documented in figure 1, and explain how we can see such a moment as a moment of social semiotics.

Figure 1: To cross a street

We see someone on a zebra crossing in what looks like a relatively busy shopping street. The person (incidentally: Jan Blommaert) moves forward on the zebra crossing; he looks to the left and his left hand is raised in a gesture signalling 'stop', 'careful' or 'thanks'. We notice also that a bus has just passed the zebra crossing, and from Blommaert's gesture we can infer that another vehicle is approaching the zebra crossing.

The zebra crossing is on the corner of the street in Antwerp, Belgium, where Blommaert lives, and it has a history. It was only recently put there by the municipality after protracted campaigning by the neighbourhood. As mentioned earlier, this is a shopping street with rather dense traffic; there is a primary school in the street, and every day hundreds of children had to cross this street without the protection of a zebra crossing. It used to be a hazardous place to cross the street, and the zebra crossing significantly improved traffic safety for pedestrians. In the terminology of the Scollons, the zebra crossing would be a 'municipal regulatory discourse' (2003: 181-185); the fact is that the sheer existence of this zebra crossing makes a huge semiotic difference, one that is inscribed in Blommaert's gesture while crossing the street. The zebra crossing flags a particular set of rights and obligations in that

particular place; it creates, so to speak, a historical micro-space with a particular order. A pedestrian on a zebra crossing has right of way, and it is mandatory for cars and other vehicles to halt in front of the zebra crossing. If a pedestrian crosses the street elsewhere, where there is no zebra crossing, s/he has no such rights and car drivers have no such obligations. Consequently, while car drivers would almost always and instantly halt their car when someone crosses a zebra crossing, they may hoot, flash their headlights, or even start scolding and shouting at pedestrians crossing elsewhere. The zebra crossing is thus a semiotic space, a 'discourse in place' that imposes, within the small confines of that space, a particular interaction order – one into which all possible participants have been effectively enskilled. Car drivers know immediately that they should halt in front of a zebra crossing, they will scan the road ahead of them for such signs and will react almost instinctively when they see a pedestrian on a zebra crossing. Pedestrians, in turn, will walk towards the zebra crossing if they intend to cross the street. They know how to recognize it, and they know that they should cross the street there if they intend to do it safely. The actual crossing, then, is another instance of enskilment, in which the pedestrian first looks left and right, ensuring that no danger is ahead, then moves across, while keeping eye contact with approaching cars and, if necessary, communicating with them by means of gestures. The gesture Blommaert make in figure 1 is actually a gesture of thanks: an acknowledgment of a driver who had stopped in front of the zebra crossing. Crossing a street is an act of communication, in which bodies interact in an orderly fashion with regulatory signs and with other participants in that space. There are dimensions of institutionality here, as well as dimensions of a more general kind of social order: people responding and adjusting to 'normal' and orderly ways of doing things.

This moment is a nexus of practice, and we see the three elements of the aggregate interacting: there is the enskilled historical body which has been adjusted to a particular historical micro-space (the zebra crossing), resulting in a particular interaction order. The interaction order emerges as soon as the enskilled body engages with the historical space – as soon as Blommaert, an experienced street-crosser, steps into a space which is institutionally defined in terms of formal rights and obligations, the zebra crossing. His engagement with that space moves his body into an environment in which certain acts of communication are mandatory, expected or desired, others transgressive. He is, for instance, expected not to unnecessarily delay the crossing; car drivers would not be overly charmed if he would start doing Michael Jackson's moonwalk on a zebra crossing in a busy street such as this one (the hooting and shouting would start at once, no matter how entertaining the performance may be). The fact is: Blommaert knows this and so do the drivers. All of us have acquired the

codes valid in such micro-spaces, and all of us are capable to shift in and out of such codes when we enter and leave such spaces. The next space will impose different codes, and again we will be familiar with them. Blommaert is, for instance familiar with the shops behind him; he knows how to behave adequately there, and he can shift in and out the interaction orders valid in them in no time. As we move through daily routines, the nexuses of practice follow each other swiftly, in a matter of seconds, often with dramatic differences between them, but rarely causing dramatic problems for those who engage in them.

Mainstream notions of communicative competence, with their emphasis on formal learning and acquisition and their focus on cognition are not sufficient to cover this vast field of flexible skills we possess and deploy in our interaction with our environments. It is to the credit of the Scollons that they understood this and offered clear and stimulating suggestions for overcoming this problem. They were particularly successful in blending the small and the big dimension of human social practice: the ways in which each act of communication is at once exceptional and typical, that it always consists of completely new forms of patterning and organization, while it derives its communicability from sharedness and recognizability of patterns. And they understood quite clearly that the way to blend these different dimensions is by introducing historical lineages to individual practices, by suggesting that uniqueness always has a pedigree, an intertext or interdiscourse which needs to be understood in the broadest possible way – that is, in relation to the totality of features of practice, including the bodily, spatial and material ones.

Their ethnography, consequently, avoids the problem of synchrony. Every aspect of the synchronically observable practice – the nexus – is historically loaded, so to speak, it drags with it its histories of use, abuse and evaluation. Thus, whenever we ethnographically investigate a synchronic social act, we have to see it as the repository of a process of genesis, development, transformation. If we see it like this, we will see it in its sociocultural fullness, because we can then begin to understand the shared, conventional aspects of it, and see it as a moment of social and cultural transmission. In that move, they focused our attention on two things we are not much used to in the field of language: on bodies as repositories of histories of experience, and on space as historically organized and patterned and as an actor in semiotic processes. We need to develop both foci further, and work is on its way from a variety of corners. One thing is sure: their efforts are significant, and while the richness of their contribution to our kinds of scholarship still awaits widespread recognition, the inspiration they gave to scholars has already left marks on the field.

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