To Understand Understanding: How Intercultural Communication is Possible in Daily Life

Germán Dario Fernández-Vavrik

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Author: Germán Darío Fernández

Affiliation: INCIHUSA/CONICET (Argentina); CEMS/IMM (France)

Abtract: I propose a few epistemological and methodological reflexions to account for intercultural daily communication. These reflexions emerged during a sociological research in Mendoza, Argentina, with Huarpes Indigenous students at the University of Cuyo. I observed that Indigenous people became quasi "ethnographers" of diverse environments. To make intelligible their classmates' behavior, and to account for their own behavior, Huarpes follow, in diverse environments and interactions, public rules of meaning. The objective of this paper is twofold: (a) to stress the methodological scope of ordinary communication and ordinary reasoning in order to study understanding between people from different groups and categories, and (b) to contest a kind of "pessimist" standpoint in social sciences and philosophy according to which the use of ordinary language reduces possibilities for understanding. Interviews, participant observation in natural situations, and a review of literature about language and understanding are the basis of this paper.

Key words: Argentina, Autoethnography, Education, Ethnicity, Huarpes, Indigenous People, Intercultural Communication, Meaning, Ordinary Reasoning, Understanding.

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To understand understanding. How intercultural communication is possible in daily life.

In 2003, the National University of Cuyo (*Universidad Nacional de Cuyo*), in Mendoza, Argentina, implemented a scholarship program for indigenous students that had no precedents in the country.[1] It included economic assistance for daily expenses, a special academic training, and pedagogical monitoring during the degree course. Those students were members of the eleven rural Huarpes communities, recently recognized by the State.[2] Since 2004, 38 young indigenous people endeavored to study in the city of Mendoza.[3] Daily life and university activities were common with people from the city and from different rural areas. Indigenous students found themselves suddenly in an intercultural environment, living and cooperating with people from diverse groups and categories. These indigenous students experienced a challenge that was unexpected for their family and friends; it was the challenge of intercultural daily communication in the

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[1]   According to a State survey, 600.329 individuals define themselves as indigenous in Argentina (ECPI–INDEC 2004), which represents only two per cent of national population. Other official and non–official estimations admit that the number may be higher: one million or one and half million indigenous people (Paladino 2008). Furthermore, the economic assistance was higher in Mendoza.

[2]   Huarpes people lived last centuries in the region of Cuyo, West of Argentina. Until recently, most local researchers agreed that these indigenous people had disappeared (Bartolomé 2004). In fact, Huarpes speak Spanish and have lost their ancient language, Huarpe–Milcallac (Paladino 2008). However, other researchers find nowadays a cultural continuity between present Huarpes and the ancestors (Escolar 2007). These communities were officially recognized by the State (*Instituto Nacional de Asuntos Indígenas*) in 1998 and 1999. The University scholarship program is one the many recent State measures to assist Huarpes families (Katzer 2010). These measures include cultural, touristic, and health programs.

[3]   Yet, only fifteen Huarpes people were inscribed in 2010.

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city. Understanding indigenous understanding, in spite of differences and asymmetries at stake, is a challenge also for researchers.

Different ways and types of understanding are at stake. In order to grasp indigenous' students experience, it is therefore necessary to bring in the field of understanding and meaning. It is necessary to go beyond the concrete fieldwork in Mendoza and to pay attention to epistemological and methodological issues. In fact, these general issues have emerged during the sociological research, as practical empirical issues.

I defend two epistemological arguments in this paper. First, understanding others is the practical aim of any member of a group and it is not an intellectual's or a researcher's privilege. Second, understanding is a public matter and it is not a private one. Based on these two philosophical arguments, the sociological problem to treat is: given that individuals belong to different categories and groups, how is understanding between them possible? The hypothesis is that understanding is a procedure consisting of following, in diverse environments and interactions, public rules of meaning. The objective of this paper is twofold: (a) to stress the methodological scope of ordinary communication and ordinary reasoning in order to study understanding between people from different groups and categories, and (b) to contest a kind of "pessimist" standpoint in social sciences and philosophy according to which the use of ordinary language reduces possibilities for understanding.

Since 2007, I conducted interviews with indigenous and non–indigenous students (some of them were not in the scholarship program) as well as with members of the students' family, professors of ⁱthe University, and people who had responsibilities in the scholarship program. In addition, I made participant observation in natural

(institutional and informal) interactional spaces.[4] This paper contains a brief review of philosophical and sociological literature about understanding and meaning, specially in the traditions of action theory (including diverse streams like analytical philosophy, social phenomenology, and ethnomethodology). I sustain the reasoning on data from the sociological research about intercultural encounters in Mendoza. This is currently the only research about indigenous Huarpes students in the city.[5]

The text has two sections. In the first section, I define understanding as a public procedure to answer three basic questions: what someone is doing right now, why she/he is doing it, and how she/he is doing it. In that vein, I will endeavor to show that indigenous students make comprehensible their urban and rural environments by explaining reasons of the actors' behavior; those actors, including the very indigenous, are involved in daily interactions. The aim of the second section is to place ordinary language as a reliable device for meaning for lay people and for researchers. I affirm that suspicions against ordinary language come from a thesis that considers meaning as a private matter. The qualitative technique "autoethnography" will be used as an epitome of this pessimist thesis. Then, I will point out a few issues concerning subjectivist and systemic thesis about understanding. These issues will lead us to consider institutions and practices as the source of meaning in language.

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[4]   In 2000, the State of Argentina had implemented the first scholarships for indigenous people (*Pograma Nacional de Becas Univesitarias, sub–programa Indígenas*) (Paladino 2008). In contrast to the University of Cuyo, these scholarships consisted exclusively of economic assistance without paying attention to academic aspects. Furthermore, the economic assistance was higher in Mendoza.

[5]   Researches about indigenous university students in Argentina are recent and scarce (Paladino 2008). First papers were published only in 2004 and 2005. According to those researches, non–indigenous people study nowadays at Argentine universities three times as much as indigenous people, within the range of age 20–29 years old.

1. To understand others

Having recourse to the tradition of action theory, I will explain how I use the word "understanding" in this paper. Along with Peter Winch (1958/1990: 1–39), to understand is to make reality intelligible. Different disciplines –such as science, art, philosophy, and religion– have at least a common interest: they are concerned with the task of understanding reality. Of course, they use different methods. A scientist and an artist do different things to understand reality. Yet, there is a common search for understanding. This common search can enable people from different fields and social sectors to communicate and cooperate. This is also true for ordinary people, engaged in ordinary knowledge of everyday affairs. People give meaning and make daily reality intelligible. What is the utility of such an understanding in daily life? First, it allows people to decide how to resolve ordinary problems.[6] Second, the understanding of reality is important to interact with others and to participate in public matters.

This ordinary knowledge is an important substance of society and it is a crucial phenomenon for social science. Winch insists that it is important to understand how people understand, in order to understand society. He seeks to get "a more detailed picture of the way in which the epistemological discussion of man's understanding of reality throws light on the nature of human society and of social relations between men" (1958/1990: 24). To understand *people* (Juan, Mercedes, Pedro), one needs to grasp understanding and communication *between people* (between Juan, Mercedes, Pedro and

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[6]   I will add a remark to Winch's arguments. Before allowing us to *resolve* ordinary problems, common understanding is a way to *produce* those common ordinary problems. (Otherwise, it could seem that problems are extern to, and independent from, human action.) Reality becomes problematic in some aspect thanks to common understanding.

the rest of society). That is, one needs to study their ordinary reasoning. To resume, we could say that understanding people is understanding between people.[7]

Inspired by Wilhelm Dilthey, Max Weber (1921/1978) gives a central place in sociology to the category of understanding. Yet, Weber does not define the concept as his predecessor (Quéré 1999). Dilthey conceives understanding in a psychological way, as empathy. To understand someone, states Dilthey, I need to put myself in another person's position and to rebuild his individual private intentions. In contrast, Weber (1921/1978) rejects the psychological perspective. If an observer can only partially understand some actions,[8] for instance, mystical behavior, this is because some information or some evidence are missing. The lack of understanding of an action is not necessarily provoked by the inaccessibility to the other's intentions or by the lack of ability to produce the same action –in this case, incompetence to produce the same kind of religious ritual. "One need not have been Caesar in order to understand Caesar" (1921/1978: 5), asserts Weber. "'Recapturing an experience,' he adds, is important for accurate understanding, but not an absolute precondition for its interpretation" (1921/1978: 5). A researcher has recourse to methodological tools in order to make up for the problem of not being Caesar.

Replace the word "Caesar" with "indigenous" or "urban people", "men", "women", "poor individuals", "middle class members", "immigrants", or "local inhabitants". In other words, replace the *Caesar* with the *people* or the word *others*. The researcher uses specific methods, which are recognized in the scientist field, but he also uses ordinary methods (Garfinkel 1967), which he knows in a practical way as a member of society.

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[7]   The aim is to obtain accounts for actors' accounts.

[8]   According to Max Weber (1921/1978), an action is a conduct to which the actor links a subjective and intended meaning. The action is social when it is oriented towards others' conduct.

1.1. Use, matter of course, and error

Three conditions fulfills people and researcher's understanding:

- it is a public affair rather than a private one;

- it appears as something natural rather than a plan or a calculation;

- it is normative and it is not random or haphazard.

First, understanding human beings and understanding between human beings is possible because understanding is a public affair. Lay people and researchers use, in daily life, methods that are recognized by their groups of reference. These "ethnomethods," as Harold Garfinkel (Garfinkel 1976) calls them, allow people to give meaning and to understand.

Concerning the relationship between language and mind, Ludwig Wittgenstein is one of the main references.[9] In *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein 1953/2009) he endeavors to prevent us against what Laugier and Chauviré call "solipsist temptations" (Laugier & Chauviré 2006: 7–16). Grammatical confusions arise when we try to describe our actions and words according to the image internal/external or

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[9]   Philosophers normally stress the change of perspective in Wittgenstein, comparing his first classic book, *Tractatus Logico–Philosophicus* with *Philosophical Investigations*, published almost thirty years later. In fact, each book influenced different and antagonistic streams in philosophy and social sciences. Yet, a continuity may be traced considering that his second philosophy still examines the nature of language and "takes up again the realistic project of *Tractatus*" (Laugier and Chauviré 2006: 12). The difference is that he accomplishes a new perspective "by means of the return to the ordinary" (Laugier and Chauviré 2006: 12).

mental/action. Since we are *already* immersed in language–game, we cannot think or feel without a language. Besides, language is rooted on a community, so there is no private language: "Our words have meaning only if they are caught in phrases, and phrases have meaning only if they are caught in a language–game, which only has meaning when it is caught in our fabric of life." (Laugier & Chauviré 2006: 10; translation is mine) Hence, to understand what someone says, we need to understand what she/he does when speaking; we do not need to "know" her/his inner state. To describe what people do is to describe their ordinary and particular linguistic practices. Thus, meaning is in front of our eyes, it is neither hidden nor obscure.

One of Wittgenstein's slogans is "meaning is use" (1953/2009). This use is according to common and public rules. In other words, meaning is a public procedure. To give meaning to an utterance or to a gesture, one needs a set of rules and a community where those rules are valid. The rule connects a particular individual's sensation with the common use of a sign. For instance, as a competent member of a community, one can describe the mountain he is observing right now in a comprehensible and common way, although he is the only person to observe it in that moment (Winch 1958/1990).

Erroneously, he could say that the private image of the mountain in his head is the source of the meaning of the public utterance about the mountain. This is because one has the tendency to consider private sensations as the source of meaning. Yet, such source is institutional: the language with which people talk about sensations (as well as about pain and pleasure) is public. In order to understand and do comprehensible things, it is necessary to follow public and anonymous rules; private individual sensations may be present or not. To follow a rule, one needs an institutional context[10] or environment

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[10]   According to Paul Drew and John Heritage, context is locally produced and it is transformable at any moment. Utterances are "context shaped" and "context renewing." Hence, context is dynamic and

in which other members recognize the rule. The sociocultural context transforms a movement into a meaningful action. One learns at the same time a word –for instance, concerning emotions or intentions– and its context of utilization, that is to say, one learns the sign with its public rule of meaning. Criteria of language about sensations are common and publicly accessible.

Therefore, meaning *is* use but it is not a *private* use. Certainly, an individual can observe privately a rule; he can be the only one to follow it. However, the rule she/he is following privately must be public for the conduct to be considered intelligible and reasonable.

Second, people's understanding is taken for granted in daily life. To act normally, intelligibly, reasonably, one does not need to "think" consciously about the rule she/he is following in a context. As Pierre Bourdieu (1980) states it, one just needs a "practical sense" for each institutional context. This competence allows an actor to understand and to decide, at a glance and in the very instant, how to act in a proper way. One just acts, naturally, like any member of the group or any participant in the situation. "The rule can only seem to me to produce all its consequences in advance if I draw them as a matter of course. As much as it is a matter of course for me to call this color 'blue.'" (Wittgenstein 1953/2009: §238) In daily life's natural attitude, I suppose that another person would "see" more or less the same as me, if she/he were in my place (Schutz 1962); moreover, I suppose that differences in perception are small enough to understand and to cooperate.[11] Cognitive and normative expectations are a common

it is not a "prestablished social framework 'containing' people's actions" (1998: 19). Against "'bucket' theory", the authors affirm that context is not a recipe book or a manual containing beforehand all the possible moves of the game.

[11]   Alfred Schutz calls these theses "idealization of the interchangeability" and "idealization of the congruency of the system of relevances."

background that is taken for granted by those who participate in a situation and in a community (Garfinkel 1967). This common knowledge gives resources to members to understand each other, to make decisions about their own behavior, and to evaluate others' behavior

Third, understanding and acting in a comprehensible way are institutionally shaped. If we do not fulfill common expectations, we do something "wrong." Therefore, to talk about rules is also to talk about mistakes. One evaluates people's action according to the pair rule/error:

> If it is possible to say of someone that he is following a rule that means that one can ask whether he is doing what he does correctly or not. Otherwise there is no foothold in his behavior in which the notion of a rule can take a grip; there is then no sense in describing his behavior in that way, since everything he does is as good as anything else he might do, whereas the point of the concept of a rule is that it should enable us to evaluate what is being done (Winch 1958/1990: 32).

An error is a break in the cognitive and normative normality (Heritage 1991). For an error to happen, an order to be broken is logically necessary. When someone makes an error, one realizes that an order has been taken for granted in the environment until that moment. We expect everybody to know and to observe common rules:

> We lean on... anticipations that we have, transforming them into normative expectations, into righteously presented demands... Typically, we do not become aware that we have made these demands or aware of what they are until an active question arises as to whether or not they will be fulfilled. It is then that we are

likely to realize that all along we had been making certain assumptions as to what the individual before us ought to be (Goffman 1963/1986: 2).

Understanding and common meanings are the basis for evaluation and categorizations in daily life. Two kinds of understanding actors practice in their environment. That is the topic of the next paragraph.

1.2. What, Why and How

Conforming to Weber (1921/1978: 5–9), we employ in daily life two kinds of understanding of an action. Through direct observational understanding, one grasps the meaning of what is happening right now. Paul Ricœur (1977) would define this immediate understanding as the intention of the action, or the "what" of the action. For instance, one observes that a woodcutter is shooting his gun or that he manifests facial expressions and emotions, as if he had an outbreak of anger. In the present research, Enzo, an indigenous university student, accounts for how he understands that his accent is different:

–When we'd just arrived to Mendoza, I mean… We had a stronger accent. It caused amazement…

–*To whom? To professors? To your classmates?*

–Um, not to professors… In particular to my classmates…Um, when we began to speak, everybody looked at us.

–*They just looked at you or they also said something?*

–Yes, no… You were in class, you spoke, and then everybody turned to look at you. Later, in the break, they asked you why, where you were from, etc. So, that's why we preferred sometimes to keep quiet.

Classmates' gestures are evidence for Enzo. He does not say, for instance, "my classmates move," but rather he describes their movement as intended actions, "everybody turns to look at" him.

The second kind of understanding is explanatory and it consists of attributing motives to the action. A motive is "a complex of subjective meaning which seems to the actor himself or to the observer an adequate ground to the conduct in question" (Weber 1921/1978: 11). When the present conduct is linked to motives, there is an answer to the "why" of the action. We can understand in the explanatory way that the woodcutter is shooting his gun in order to prevent an attack from a dangerous animal. Further, we can grasp that his outbreak of anger is part of an irritating situation, for instance, having forgotten his gun.

Also Enzo explains his classmates' conduct, giving some reasons. In the classroom, participants' behavior and motives are meaningful. Enzo expresses anxiety when perceiving that his classmates consistently turn to look at him when he speaks. After a brief exploration to find out what happens and why they act this way, he understands that his classmates' gestures are based on motives. These individuals are surprised at his rural way of talking. Then, by defining his accent as rural, that is, as regular, normal, and typical, Enzo also gives meaning to his own behavior He does not act "by caprice," but his action has motives of origin. He explains everybody's actions according to motives and thus actions become understandable and reasonable.

Mabel, another indigenous student, gives reasons from a different perspective. She has obtained the University scholarship because her family settled –a short time ago– in a Huarpe community. To be accepted in the community, her father had to prove his indigenous ancestry. Yet, she was brought up in a small rural town and has never lived next to other indigenous families. Therefore, ethnic and rural memberships appear in tension at this moment of her biography. She offers an account of his intercultural experience from a frontier standpoint. Her attitude consists of describing and comparing three experiences: (a) the experience of living in a community; (b) that of living in a small town; (c) the experience of living in the city of Mendoza.

Mabel explains that the community where her family lives now is a semi–desert. Water and pasture are scarce. She describes both communitarian life and urban people's behavior:

> I have a strong relationship with my father; I ask him all the time about life in the Huarpe community. I'm always trying to understand a bit more... People follow the idea of communitarian land there. That's the concept that people from the city don't understand sometimes. You say, "how is it possible…?"

The girl tries to understand *how* people live in a community and, at the same time, she tries to understand *how* people from the city could understand communitarian social organization. Moreover, she tries to correct urban people's prejudices about rural communitarian life. Yet, she tries to be reasonable with urban people. By switching from third person of plural –"they don't understand–" to the second person of singular – "you say–," she puts herself in an urban person's position. Mabel expresses that this person's prejudices are reasonable, anyway. There are valid reasons for an urban person

to have a skeptical attitude towards communitarian life. Mabel seems to endeavor a pedagogical task consisting of identifying the prejudices and, then, of furnishing the "correct" information. She explains with examples what a communitarian life is:

I mean, goats are my father's but he doesn't keep them in a closed place [in a farmyard].... Early in the morning, people let out the goats go alone the country [the goats walk to provide food and water by themselves]. The animals come back at the end of the day by themselves. That's why people fight against the idea of having plots of land with wire fence....[12] If you have an animal in a closed place, you interrupt their feeding... And when it hasn't rained for long time and there's not enough water in the country, not only my father's animals come back to his house to drink water, but also do it his neighbors' animals. You don't say: 'No, I only give water to my animals and not to other's.'

Mabel shows that communitarian life functions as an economic strategy adapted to a semi–desert region. To understand actors' behavior, the young student gives reasons and explains how people normally act. Thus, everybody's behavior, including prejudices and economic decisions, are meaningful and reasonable. Mabel's account is a set of reasons organized in many levels, according to the two environments where she is now involved, the community and the city.

According to Weber (1921/1978: 7–13), phenomena devoid of (direct or explanatory) meaning do not belong to the action. They are mere stimuli, results,

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[12]   There are several processes in Mendoza's court started by people who claim to be the real owners of Huarpes' lands. If lands were given to these people, wire fences will interrupt the animals feeding, explains Mabel.

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favoring or hindering circumstances of a person's action. Motives are meaningful because they belong to the action. When we explain why someone did something, we are still talking about her/his action; we are not describing external or preceding phenomena of the action –for instance, mental states or facts. Thus, motives are not causes.[13] Urban people's skeptical attitude is not the "effect" of ignoring the "truth" about community organization. Similarly, speaking about Enzo, classmates' amazement is not the "cause" of their gesture. Gestures and amazement, as well as misunderstandings, constitute a unity, that is, the common intercultural situation.

If motifs are neither facts nor causes, then explanatory understanding is only probabilistic (1921/1978: 9–11). The complex of motives is a plausible hypothesis, not a "correct" causal interpretation of "true facts."[14] The aim is not to "represent" or to "reproduce" reality. Motifs are not necessarily clear or conscious and actions are normally inspired in contradictory impulses. Instead of things, mental states, facts, or causes that one could detect, motives are considered hypothesis. Therefore, researchers

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[13]   According to the philosopher David Hume, a cause is an event that meets two conditions (Ricœur, 1977). First, the cause is independent from the effect. Second, the cause is contingent to the effect.

[14]   Weber proposes the use of ideal types to compare the observed action to a stylized model of the action. Some researchers, for instance from ethnomethodological perspectives, bring into question the utility of ideal types to study the rationality of an action (Quéré, 1999). They affirm that it is not convenient to establish beforehand what rationality is. They rather consider actors' rationality as something situated and particular that emerges in a situation and not something that exists previous to the situation. Rationality is analyzed as the character of an interaction instead of as a character of a particular actor.

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and lay people understand someone's behavior as a whole.[15] They do not need to "detect" a collection of "true" external and particular motives of her/his conduct.

To sum up, indigenous students construct and use motives to understand *what* and *how* people do, as well as *why* they are doing it. With ordinary language, intercultural environment becomes in some way intelligible for them. To understand the what, the how and the why, they do not need a special technique. All indigenous students need is to use (and to improve) their linguistic and cultural ordinary competences as members of society. What about researchers? We do quite the same. The differences between scholars and actors are twofold. First, we have an interest and are especially trained to understand the behavior of members of different groups and categories. Second, we have an obvious interest in writing papers about understanding. Yet, some colleagues do not seem to agree with this conclusion. They consider that ordinary language does not really lead us to understand one another, in daily life.

2. How do we understand?

2.1. Methodological pessimism

> All those words are right there, around him, as diligent servants: he just needs to take them. Yet, as soon as he tries to use them, words betray him.[16]
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> *Jean Paul Sartre, Situations*

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[15]   Ricœur (1977) states that the notion of social action must be explained simultaneously with the notions of intention, motive, and agent. Each notion defines the others inside the language–game of action. That is why we should speak of "inter–signification" of the terms, rather than of signification.

[16]   "Tous les mots sont là, autour de lui, serviteurs empressées: il n'y a qu'è les prendre. Et pourtant, dès qu'il veut s'en servir, ils les trahissent." (Sartre 1947: 198; the translation is mine).

As we all know, Jean Paul Sartre was not a methodologist but a brilliant philosopher.[17] However, some of his ideas were used as a ground by a subsequent "subjectivist" standpoint (Bourdieu 1980) that became popular over the last fifty years in social sciences. Some of his arguments may serve as a pretext to make explicit a crucial and practical problem in social sciences: how is it possible that you and I could understand one another, even though we are different people?

In Sartre's perspective, meaning is private (Descombes 1996). Ironically, only words that were not uttered have an "authentic" meaning. An individual is the master of the words' inner meaning only when he is alone. The isolated individual is the model, the "authentic me." Given this privileged access to his interior, to his mind or to his "heart," he knows better what he intends to express. If the source of meaning is internal, language is just "a simple surface of contact between me and the Other" (Sartre 1947: 237).

The reasoning follows in this way. Problems begin when the individual expresses his words in the presence of someone else. Words seem to become objects with independent life. In that moment, original meaning blurs. The master loses control over the signs and his gestures are interpreted in different ways. According to this logic of authenticity, misunderstandings are the rule in social life. Authentic meaning seems to "escape" because of the others' existence. Meaning is "stolen" by others; the self becomes alienated in social life. The use of ordinary language appears to lead people to confusion, to disorientation, and to a lack of understanding.

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[17]   I do not intend to discuss here Sartre's philosophy but one of his many heritages.

From the subjectivist assumption[18] according to which experience is subjective and private, a methodological pessimism about understanding arises. If meaning is private, researcher's understanding of others' experience becomes superficial. He or she can only seek to obtain poor sketches of this experience. There seems to be, in some place, a "real" experience with a wild, uncontainable, and "non–capturable" meaning. Since we do not have a perfect language, meaning can neither be expressed by the "bearer" nor be grasped by others. In our research, the lack of a perfect language would condemn classmates, professors, or observers to ignore a myriad of images and feelings of the "authentic" and internal Huarpes indigenous experience.

Based on the supposition of authentic and subjective meaning, and oriented by the pessimistic standpoint about ordinary language, scientists of the subjectivist turn propose the study of experience from the grammatical first person.[19] They promote the recourse to autoethnography, a qualitative technique used to account for researcher's reflexivity. Through autoethnography, a Black individual accounts for the racial experience; a woman accounts for the experience of gender; an Indigenous person,

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[18] In *The logic of practice* Bourdieu offers (1980/1990: 42–51) other pertinent arguments against the kind of "subjectivist" phenomenological standpoint whose tenants intend a "reflexive return to the subjective experience of the world" (1980/1990: 25). Bourdieu proposes an intermediate epistemological position, different from "subjectivist" position and from "objectivist" (structuralist) one. The principle of practices is neither individuals' subjective experiences nor anonymous structures (which are statistically measurable). The correct principle, he affirms, is the "practical sense." Yet, Bourdieu occasionally seems to mix up, under the label "subjectivism," phenomenological perspectives that are too different and heterogeneous to be bound together.

[19] By analyzing a certain use of the term subjectivity, I do not intend to defend a kind of "neutral" standpoint in social science, concerning values.

ethnic experience, and so forth. These people are supposed to be in a privileged epistemological position to speak about race, gender, or ethnic affairs.

According to Norman Denzin (2006: 420), autoethnography belongs to the so–called "creative analytical practices," which include fiction stories, poetry, reader's theater, aphorisms, comedy and satire, and memoirs, among others. In the 1960's, Chicago School researchers used autoethnography as a complement to fieldwork. Kathy Charmaz (2006), who defends the so–called "realistic autoethnography,"[20] states that her colleagues nowadays use autoethnography as mere auto–observation:

> [They] have taken over the name autoethnography and overtaken its realist history in ethnographic work.... This research [realistic autoethnography] started with detailed descriptions and analysis of the ethnographer's experience but moved outward into the social world and upward into theoretical discourse. Instead, autoethnographers now concentrate on their own past or present experience.... What has changed is the extent to which diverse social scientists limit their narratives to personal experience (2006: 396–397).

"Evocative autoethnographers" –as Charmaz calls them– give grammatical first person a privileged status in the account for the experience. The researcher is the witness, the bearer, and the owner of the experience. She/he knows better the experience and can better describe it from the first person.

In that vein, Nicholas Holt (2003) informs that, through this technique, "…authors use their own experiences in a culture reflexively to look more deeply at self–other

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[20] Leon Anderson and Loïc Wacquant are two important figures of this "realistic" autoethnography (Charmaz 2006).

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interactions." Carolyn Ellis presents autoethnography as a way to "connect" researcher's personal experience to her/his institutional context (Ellis 2000). She defines[21] autoethnography as "research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political. Autoethnography forms feature concrete action, emotion, embodiment, self consciousness, and introspection (Ellis 2004: xix)." Anna Smith asserts that the technique is a way of "revealing and evoking the character of the person who spoke" (Smith 1994, xxiii–xxiv). The individual give the impression of "revealing" himself and a secret something appears. It is then a "kind [of art] that takes you deeper inside yourself and ultimately out again" (Friedwald, 1996: 126). This epistemological privilege seems to give the researcher authentic and sincere insight: "I seek a writing form that enacts a methodology of the heart, a form that listens to the heart... In writing from the heart, we learn how to love, to forgive, to heal, and to move forward." (Denzin 2006: 423). Again, words seem to "betray" the subject/bearer: "Autoethnographic texts point out not only the necessity of narrative in our world but also the power of narrative to reveal and revise that world, even when we struggle for words, when we fail to find them, or when the unspeakable is invoked but not silent" (Jones 2008: 211). Thus, in this pessimistic methodological standpoint, grammatical third person of discourse appears in an inferior status. The use of third person would provoke an alteration of the lived and experienced meaning.[22] In the next paragraph, I present four arguments against these assumptions.

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[21]   The authors offer diverse definitions of autoethnography that are not necessarily coherent among them. Anyway, they all stress the central importance of subjectivity and state the privacy of meaning.

[22]   Sometimes, the authors consider that ruling groups are responsible for the lost of original meaning. Stacy Holman Jones defines autoethnography as "witnessing experience and testifying about power without foreclosure –of pleasure, of difference, of efficacy." (Jones 2008: 208). Then,

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2.2. Limits of private experience

At least four issues emerge from the thesis of private meaning. First, if words persistently betray us, then it should be true that we never really understand one another. It is as if ordinary language were inadequate and imperfect for expressing the richness of meaning that "exists" inside a subject. For instance, it is said, the richness of sensations when smelling coffee cannot be expressed. A perfect language appears as the greatest wish and as the theoretical solution to misunderstandings. Yet, Wittgenstein (1953/2009) demonstrates how absurd this project of a perfect language is:

> Describe the aroma of coffee! — Why can't it be done? Do we lack the words? And *for what* are words lacking? — But how do we get the idea that such a description must after all be possible? Have you ever felt the lack of such a description? Have you tried to describe the aroma and not succeeded? (1953/2009: §610).

Indeed, I will perfectly understand when you talk about drinking, buying, producing, or smelling coffee. I will have a correct insight –for practical purposes– of your pleasure about coffee and I will know if you accept or not my invitation to go drink a cup of coffee today. I will grasp what you are saying about coffee and why and how you are speaking about it right now. Otherwise, you will have the opportunity to repair the

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"autoethnographic texts... democratize the representational sphere of culture by locating the particular experiences of individuals in tension with dominant expressions of discursive power." (Neumann, 1996: 189).

misunderstanding –for instance, if I believed that you accepted and you did not intend to accept my invitation. Therefore, we do not need a perfect language; ordinary language works well for practical purposes.

Secondly, the assumption of authentic private meaning is held up on a logical mistake. As Louis Quéré (2007) states it, truth and untruth are attributed to something that cannot logically accept these predicates. When I say, "I have a toothache," am I saying something "true?" To answer this question, I should first make observations with public methods and then confirm (or refute) the utterance. However, where could I make such observations? Where "is" my toothache? I do not mean the teeth, but the ache; where are aches located? How is it possible to be a witness of one's own ache? These weird questions arise from a confusion of grammatical persons. One can say in the third person, "Juan has a toothache," inferring it from evidences, such as Juan's gestures and screams. My utterance can be confirmed or refuted if other evidences appear (I determine, for instance, that Juan was just faking to avoid going to school). Yet, when I speak in the first person about my own toothache, I cannot logically be wrong. It is not possible for me to refute this utterance; the ache is an immediate certitude and it is not something to be demonstrated. It is absurd to say that I need public methods to prove my ache in order to confirm the truth of my utterance. In the same way, meanings, feelings, or images that one experiences are neither true nor false. They are just certitudes, emerging with no mediation. It is absurd to speak about true or authentic meanings.

It is also valid for Enzo's account. His anxiety is not a "real" inner sensation to be discovered and located in a sector of his body or his mind. In other words, anxiety is not a predicate that could be confirmed or refuted, but it is a way of describing the intercultural situation, as a whole, when interacting in the classroom.

Third, to place individual meanings as the source of truth is to reproduce the Cartesian dualism (Descombes 1979: 94–97). When a subject places himself as the origin of truth, his existence is the only certainty and it is then the measure of other existences, which are less certain. This Cartesian subject, who has private experiences and keeps authentic meanings inside, places himself/herself as the master of the world, such as it appears to him. That subject claims an absolutist position. Logically, there can be only one absolute thing. The evident problem for a sociologist is: how is it possible to think and to study the social world, if consciousnesses are considered the only absolute origin of the meaning? What happens when each consciousness, which is member of a group or a community, aspire to this absolute position? Common life does not seem conceivable. In the pessimistic approach of ordinary language, the status of common institutions and social life is undermined. Institutions are between and outside private individual consciousnesses.

Finally, if meaning is subjective instead of intersubjective, theoretical shared knowledge of the social world is impossible. In each affair, there would be as many "true" meanings as people are engaged in the affair. Quéré's arguments (1999), concerning "hermeneutic standpoint" in sociology, could be paraphrased here. Because of the private meaning standpoint, discourses and opinions proliferate without an intersubjective criterion to evaluate their pertinence and accuracy.

2.3

[…]

2.4. Meaning and institutions

Meaning is a public and visible reality rather than a hidden or a secret one. It is located in institutions, conventions, and practices. Vincent Descombes (1996) uses the peculiar formulation "institutions of meaning" to speak about the source of meaning. The word "institution" does not mean here mere social organization, like a hospital or a government office. Institutions are "social ways of acting and thinking," according to Marcel Mauss' classical definition (Mauss 1901/2002). Following Montesquieu, Descombes asserts that fundamental social institutions are organized as a whole of meaning.[23] To compare a French law with an English one, states Montesquieu, it is necessary to describe first their cultural context, as a dynamic whole. It is not sufficient to compare both *particular laws*; one needs to study the relationship between both countries' *idea systems*. The concept of whole does not mean the sum of its parts, but it is the ensemble of common customs and practices. Legal practices are included in this cultural whole. The meaning and the importance of a law depend less on its particular contents than on its place and use inside the culture. In the same vein, the meaning of our gestures and our words depends (in Wittgenstein's terms) on their place in a language–game and in a concrete "fabric of life."

Language is made of customs and common ways of giving meaning that pre–exist (historically and logically) to individuals. As Charles Taylor states it, private images can go with the act of communication, but the essential is out there: "Meaning and norms implicit in [the] practices are not just in the mind of the actors but are out there in the practices themselves, practices which cannot be conceived as a set of individual actions, but which are essential modes of social relation, of mutual action." (1985: 36).

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[23]   Conforming to Descombes (1996: 287), Hegel's notion of "objective spirit" is equivalent to Montesquieu's concept of "spirit of laws." Both concepts make reference to a society's cultural whole of meaning. Hegel recognizes Montesquieu's influence in this point, as shown by Descombes.

If one gives meaning by following public and common rules, it is then necessary to define how the word "common" is used in this paper, by distinguishing it from the word "shared." By saying that rules are *common*, I mean that they are supposed to be valid and mandatory for all the members of the community, in general. On the other hand, the term *shared* means partitioned or distributed between a finite number of individuals, as stated in a pact. For instance, a group of neighbors may share a terrain, signing a contract and dividing the space according to some clause. They may have different rights with reference to the terrain, the services, or the resources. Then, there may be a square in a venue of the neighborhood A neighbor is not logically allowed to say, "This piece of square is mine and that is yours." The square is not shared but it is common to all the members and, in this sense, there cannot be distinctions among them.

Each term, "shared" and "common", belongs to different epistemological thesis (Naishtat 1998). According to "methodological individualism," a collective concept, like group or community, can always be reduced to, or explained with, more fundamental concepts, that is, with individual subjects' actions, beliefs, desires, and feelings. Individual concepts (*explanans*) may be aggregated to form a collective noun (*explanandum*). In this case, individuals share a category or a group. On the contrary, a "methodological holist" asserts that a person is a product of social environment. Individuals are not the ground of a society but institutions are the ground. To understand individuals' actions (*explanandum*), it is necessary to explain first how institutions, conventions, and groups (*explanans*) function. Institutions are not *shared* by concrete individuals but they are *common* to the society members. Durkheim, Mauss, Garfinkel, and Descombes defend the second thesis.

Concerning the concept of interpersonal communication, Descombes (1996: 291) affirms that a meaning is common if it is mandatory for everybody (including for actors

and researchers, I add). "Institutions of meaning" are common because they are imposed from outside, anonymously, as a social fact (in a Durkheimian sense). Similarly, Garfinkel (1967) maintains that common understanding in daily life does not rely on "a quantity of knowledge" of social structure, which would be shared and measurable. It depends exclusively on the obligation of acting according to common expectations of ordinary life:

> Common sense knowledge of the facts of social life for the members of the society is institutionalized knowledge of the real world. Not only does common sense knowledge portray a real society for members, but in the manner of a self–fulfilling prophecy, the features of the real society are produced by person's motivated compliance with these background expectancies (1967: 53).

To speak a language, we need a competence or know–how (Ryle 1949: 27–31) allowing us to consider how to follow correctly common meaning rules in many situations. The know–how is procedural; first, one needs to do this, second, that, and so forth. Nevertheless, we do not apply rules, like a recipe book, to carry out this procedure. We know common rules, including meaning rules, in a practical way, rather than in an intellectual way. The procedure is a public way of acting that may (or not) be enacted, performed, and modified, in some circumstances, by actors interacting with the environment. Thus, acting correctly in a given sociology–cultural environment depends on that capacity of learning, following, and changing common rules.

People can recognize an individual as an authentic group's member through her/his linguistic and cultural competences. This dialog with Enzo is revealing. He has just described how his classmates turn to look at him when speaking in the class:

–Do you feel that you've changed your way of speaking, because of this experience, of people turning to look at you?

–Um… yes, it did. Um… I've changed a lot. For instance, I speak louder, that's what I do now. I speak slower too. I mean, I still don't speak like an "authentic" inhabitant from Mendoza but [laughing] yes, I speak slower now.

It is interesting to pay attention to Enzo's use of persons in this paragraph. At the beginning, he uses the third person of singular, "it," to speak about the way of speaking. This form is grammatically coherent with the form of my question; I asked about the way of speaking (it). Immediately, he switches to the first person, "I," to assume grammatically the responsibility for the action, the act of changing.

Enzo's utilization of the term "authentic" sounds certainly ironic in this context.[24] Anyway, by using this term, Enzo shows that he is aware of the implications of speaking like urban people. This awareness is part of a more general behavior In his account, he appears as someone who assumes the responsibility for the linguistic register; each register is a way of accomplishing the origin and the membership.

As indicated above, Enzo describes himself as someone who is quite anxious about his accent. To explain his different accent, he describes how people speak in the classroom. His urban classmates consider classroom life as if it were natural and taken for granted. They know how to speak and how to act in this environment without special attention. Enzo denaturalizes this local environment, transforming natural daily life into a kind of grammar, in a mere procedure. This grammar is made of public rules

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[24]   That is the reason why the transcription of the word authentic has quotation marks. Ironic register is audible through peculiar pitch and prosody.

that are susceptible of being known practically or even intellectually. Speaking "normally" in that environment consists of (in accordance with his own description) speaking more loudly, slowly, and clearly than he did, articulating each word, opening his mouth wider, and conjugating differently the verbs in the second person of singular.

For instance, to express "you have," people from his community say "vos tenís" instead of "vos tenés" –the official and urban form in Argentina. Enzo claims that (a) the form "tenís" is correct and that (b) the other form is incorrect; urban people make a mistake in this point, he believes. In order to sustain his judgment and to build his argumentation, he has recourse to anonymous, conventional, and dominant Spanish grammar rules. He has not recourse to mere tradition or habit. The form of his argumentation is "one must talk this way" instead of "we (people from the community) talk this way."

Enzo learns first how one speaks in the classroom and then he considers with detachment this urban grammar:

–Here, at the city of Mendoza, we [indigenous students] had to explain all the time what we said. That was embarrassing. It used to happen to me before, not now. Thanks to God, it changed now...

–*Have you ever had the temptation to imitate people from Mendoza, to be like them?*

–To imitate them?

–*Yes, to imitate them, I mean, to learn something to…*

–No [interrupting].

–*…to avoid being identified as a Huarpe.*

–I don't know, maybe… I mean, I found it was a necessity. But on principle or just because I didn't like it [to imitate urban people], I've never wanted to do it. Yes, in fact my colleagues [other indigenous students] did it faster. They found also that it was a necessity. At the moment, I still speak… I mean, even though I speak louder, clearer, slower than I did… I still speak like people from the country.

After having defined and described both grammars, rural and urban, Enzo can decide to keep his rural accent. This accent is not described as a cultural fate but as a cultural choice. He is responsible for his way of speaking. He shows his rural accent as proof of having conserved one aspect of his rural and ethnic heritage. In the next question, I introduced a term used by another actor during an interview. It was the term "contaminated," a metaphor to express corruption, change, or degradation. I brought into play this term in every interview, to observe reactions. Without asking any extra explanation, actors seemed to always have something to say about it. So does Enzo:

–Are you afraid of being "contaminated" because of living here in the city?

–Um, yes. Um, yes… It is unavoidable to be contaminated but I… I… It all depends on… [he points out his head].

–…on the mind.

–Yes. Professor X always says to me, "You're the only one who hasn't 'agringado.' I use the term "agringado" all the time.

–"Agringado"? What is it?

–Well [his attitude becomes pedagogical]; "agringado" is someone who lives like a person from the city of Mendoza. It means not to be anymore… not to live like in the country.

The noun root "gringo," foreign, forms the colloquial term "agringado." Therefore, agringado here means someone who has incorporated foreign habits. Because Enzo and other indigenous students' behaviors are accountable, these people constantly risk being regarded as agringados. Concerning the origin, the agringado is someone whose accomplishment is morally condemned.

Hector is another indigenous student who gives an account for the ethnic accomplishment in Mendoza. Like Enzo, Hector pays special attention to what people from the rural area consider and judge. He introduces another colloquial term, "agrandado,"[25] boastful, self–aggrandizing. In this fragment, he was talking about younger indigenous students who have just arrived to the city of Mendoza:

–Did you ever notice if [other indigenous young students] behave different now from before, when they lived in the community?

–Yes.

–How did you notice it?

–In the way of speaking, the way of making gestures, the way of sitting, also... Especially, you note it in the way of speaking. When you arrive to the country, you begin to speak with somebody [a peasant] and he immediately catches it. He catches when you are faking or when you are being yourself. You can't imagine how peasants react!

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25   The root of the term is "agrandar", to get or to make bigger.

–How?

–They… they immediately label you. Labels… People use a lot the term "agrandado." "How *agrandado* he has become!" they say.

Hector describes what a person should do to be considered an authentic member. He especially stresses the linguistic performance, the use of certain vocabulary. He also refers to other behavior, including moral actions, like simplicity or self–confidence:

–For instance, the way of sitting shouldn't mind you; if you're sitting properly or not. I mean, to sit is… it means to me… to feel comfortable... Sometimes they [indigenous young students] try to do the same than a postmodern person; to go out dancing on weekend or to go out drinking... And they [women] dress "like a cat."

–What is to dress "like a cat"?

–Deep low–cut (he smiles); to walk like models [as if they were in a fashion show]

Like it was stated *supra*, indigenous students explain their own behavior and others' behavior as reasonable and comprehensible, by describing *what* is happening, *why* people are acting in that way in that context, and *how* this reasonable action is accomplished. In this sense, Hector describes what his colleagues are doing –trying to imitate someone else, pretending, faking, and not being oneself– and, like Enzo and Mabel, he explains the possible reasons for such behavior Then, he presents a list of tasks to accomplish in order to be considered authentic members. Rural accent, simple dressing, and relaxed gestures are ways of accomplishing rural and indigenous status in

daily life, giving public evidences of ethnic pride. Equally, Enzo uses the expression "to live" like people in the community instead of "to be" like people in the community. He is not describing what a gringo *is*, but he points out what a person should *do* to be considered one. Thus, their register is not essentialist but it is persistently performative.

According to their description, indigenous students in Mendoza learn how to act reasonably by interacting in everyday social life. The reasonable character of practices appears thanks to public grammars, concerning each status, urban or rural. Grammars prescribe expectations, rights, and stereotypes (Fernández 2009). By giving a definition of the situation, these students can specify the constraints to which they will (or will not) conform. Indigenous people search actors' reasons and motives to give a "correct" definition and, thus, to act "properly."

Hence, besides describing the passive dimension of the intercultural experience – anxiety, suffering, sadness–, the indigenous students stress their active role in the new context. They present themselves as transfigured individuals, gifted with new intercultural competences. Thanks to the new capacity of describing the natural (urban and rural) environments as mere grammars with knowledgeable rules, they become "ethnographers" of their environments.

Ordinary reasoning allows actors to identify rules and to act in a proper and intelligible way. They do not need special techniques but rather ordinary communicational competences. Now, the same is true for researchers. If they and actors are members of a community, they have common cultural competences to give meaning to reality. Researchers' competences are just a particular and specific development of actors' ordinary communicational competences (Garfinkel 1967; Heritage 1991). Researchers pay attention to, describe, and explain how actors give accounts for their daily matters. In fact, papers and articles are accounts for actors' accounts, instead of

being the "last word" concerning others' experience. There is an epistemological continuity between actors and researchers, rather than a break.

Conclusion

Understanding is possible in daily life by following common and public rules. The source of meaning is a whole of common conventions, institutions, or ways of acting and thinking. To learn a language is to develop a competence allowing us to understand one another in a practical way, by following common rules. When origin and membership are different, intercultural competences allow actors to endeavor communication and cooperation. Like any skill, intercultural know–how may be publicly trained and evaluated. Indigenous actors become quasi–ethnographers because of their *sui generis* talent to identify and to denaturalize rules in different environments. For researchers, actors' practices become intelligible in some way, by detecting background common rules.

Actors do not generally formulate those public rules, which allow people to understand and to give meaning. Rules are not *said* but they are certainly *shown*. Consequently, instead of describing actors' subjective or private experience (for instance, that of the very researcher in autoethnography), it is enough to describe the grammar that is tacitly shown in actors' accounts. Some barriers between actors and researchers fall thanks to everyday communication and common rules. It does not mean that people, whose membership and status are in fact diverse and frequently imposed, are "equal" or that their possibilities for communication are symmetrical. By contrast, it was stressed in this paper some of what actors can do to communicate, despite social and cultural asymmetries and inequalities. By interacting, cooperating, and working

together, actors and researchers can learn how to understand each other, in some aspect. They can do this just as they normally can make themselves understand in their sociocultural environment, even though their origin and their membership to groups and categories may differ.

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