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An argument for sparsity

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I consider the influence of the language used in anthropological analysis (the metalanguage). If in principle there are at least as many anthropologies as there are languages, then we must allow the possibility of seven thousand or so more or less incommensurable anthropologies. However, incommensurability need not follow: not only can sparse theory aid comparison but it can also help establish partial (incomplete) commensurability. The parsimony of sparse theory allows for clarity even when dealing with vague ideas. If to achieve this some fashionable terms of analysis have to avoided, this is a price worth paying. In sum: we should all say less more clearly.

This article considers the influences of the languages used in anthropological analysis. If in principle there are as many anthropologies as there are languages, then potentially there are some seven thousand anthropologies, all more or less incommensurable. Sparse theory can facilitate the task of comparison and establish partial (incomplete) commensurability. The very parsimony of sparse theory is helpful, allowing anthropologists to achieve clarity even when discussing unclear or vague ideas. I illustrate my thesis with some exemplary instances of clear writing on difficult topics.

The key starting point is a position of humility and a desire to frame an anthropology that does *not get to have the last word*, while yet honouring its global, comparative perspectives. The way out of the conundrum (not, I think, a contradiction) is to aspire to create accounts that are knowingly incomplete, leaving room for others to provide alternative and/or complementary accounts. I think much of our theoretical development is an impediment to such a goal since the exuberance with which theory is developed is, dare I say it, imperialistic: theories are developed to win space and exclude others (those that they reject as incorrect). Sparse theory sketches rather than photographs (let alone scans); it leaves space open and does not define boundaries for it cannot: by saying relatively little, it cannot impose itself as *the* definitive account. We can still argue, and I hope we will, and perhaps it is in the comparative sphere that this

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will come out clearest: we can see how sparse accounts from different cultural traditions are similar (what Candea [2019] calls lateral comparison).

So, rather than trying to develop a super- or meta-theory of everything, I think we should be building a scaffold (Carrithers 2018: 228-9) which can be used to support (prop up) ethnographic accounts. I particularly like the idea of *bamboo* scaffolding, which is flimsy but resilient. The scaffold pieces are weak – individual spars may have to be replaced over time. Yet such scaffolding is mostly durable enough for individual spars to be changed (like the long-established model of Otto Neurath's boat being repaired plank by plank while still at sea). Such resilience may be scary for those who do not like to see long drops through the gaps beneath their feet. Collapses are rare but they do occur.[1]

Potentially, the meaning of every term used may be questioned and we risk regressing to an infinite spiral of definition and redefinition. One way out of this is to use a limited and hopefully less than tendentious set of terms. (Such is Anna Wierzbicka's programme briefly discussed below.) For distinctions between 'wicked concepts' and those of an ostensibly less contentious kind are not easy or straightforward to make. Moreover, what may seem clear to one person may not appear so to another reader, and as one reviewer pointed out, there are important matters about the identity of the readership to consider. (As the reviewer put it, 'being clear is a relational achievement rather than purely a matter of word choice – "legalese", for instance, is as clarifying and precise to lawyers as it is obfuscating … to the rest of us'.) That said, *clarity* and *sparsity* as theoretical primes (basic, relatively uncontentious, shared ideas[2]) are without special anthropological meanings and, I think, are less contentious than other, more fashionable words such as *ontology* or *perspective*, so I rely on my readers' intuitions (as, eventually, every writer must) to provide the bridgehead to enable the discussion to begin. If this is not possible, then truly incommensurability starts at home and I cannot communicate with my colleagues.[3] I will assume that discussion is possible and proceed on the somewhat questionable premise that my words are comprehensible, but, of course, if they are not, then reciprocally my critics can have little hope that I will be able to understand their criticisms, however well phrased they may be.

Words matter: used badly, they can mislead, confuse, and make trouble. Words in theory matter too: misplaced concreteness and reification are linguistic traps from which anthropologists have long struggled to free themselves. Theoretical vocabulary must therefore be chosen carefully. Using alternative terms can help, but simply substituting synonyms does not really solve anything. Underlying any language of description is a politics, a language ideology which should not be buried and left unexamined.[4] The very sparsity of the terms of sparse theory will make this reflexivity easier to undertake than is possible with much contemporary theorizing. I discuss some of the relevant literature on language ideology below.

At a meta-level, we need ways to consider the terms in which we frame our discussions. I suggest that keeping analytical vocabulary sparse can help, and later on I give some examples of clearly written, delicately sensitive ethnographies that eschew theory fetishization.

Why might such comparisons be helpful? Discussing translation, John Leavitt says:

> As Boas insisted, one can speak of any subject in any language – at the limit, one might have to add some vocabulary. This means that referential content can be translated, if only sometimes via elaborate paraphrases: the fact of translatability of referential content is indeed universal (2014: 204).

Discussions of these issues (Herzfeld 2017; Zeitlyn & Just 2014: chap. 4) show that the ultimate reflex of *anthropological* translation is to write a monograph about a delicate and difficult point of translation. It is precisely when translation becomes difficult that anthropologists become interested. Much may be written about a single translation problem (e.g. Nilotic equations between birds and twins). The intention is that, having explored the topic from many vantage points, readers will gain some understanding of how speakers of a language view a particular issue. That is what anthropological translation, and indeed anthropology, has to offer rather than any neat, simple equations connecting source and target languages. Anthropologists are not in the business of creating translation manuals.

All natural languages are reflexive and each can serve as its own metalanguage.[5] Because of the nature of social life, all social languages must enable discussion of society. As a century or more of anthropological research has shown, there are considerable problems in using, for example, English, French, or German as comparative sociological metalanguages. This is epitomized in Carsten Levisen's (2019) warnings of the 'conceptual colonialism' of Anglocentrism, the assumption that English categories are universal. However, the very existence of the *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies, Dictionnaire des intraduisibles*[6] (Barbara Cassin 2004 and 2014) shows that these problems are surmountable (see also Cassin 2009). Indeed, discussions about the processes of Mambila translation starting with Cassin's introduction to that volume and the current work by the Mambila intellectual Mark Mouh on the Old Testament have led, indirectly, to this article.

In one of her articles discussing the *Dictionary of untranslatables* project, Cassin anticipates Matei Candea's idea of lateral comparison. She says she is interested in confronting and exploiting plurality and continues by saying that

> Comparison doesn't require a common tertium quid ('globish-technish', a conceptual language), but a common space or geometry, a topic, a topology, allowing terminological networks to show how they are and how they aren't superposable from one language to another, and even from one oeuvre to another in the same language (epoch, genre, author, style); how, in an analogous manner, syntaxes are and are not superposable (Cassin 2009: 7).

I think sparse theory can help realize these ambitions, providing the scaffolding for Cassin's and other comparative projects.

The existence of over seven thousand[7] potential anthropological terminologies and analytical frameworks is suggested by the variety of currently existing grammatical frameworks implicit in the different languages spoken around the world. This is difficult territory: I am well aware of the danger of equating 'an anthropology' with the language in which it is written (or an ethnic group with the language they speak). We know that not all ethnic groups speak different languages and that some speak many (Connell & Zeitlyn 2010; in press). In any case, we must make conscious the usually unconscious influences of the language used in any one academic tradition (as Levisen [2019] argues). That is why I use the idea of multiple anthropologies, for all the well-founded reservations about counting languages and cultural groups. As one example of the countless idiosyncrasies, the term 'social class' is etymologically a 'scholastic' concept, based on the idea of school classes, so the idea of regimented, artificial (consciously created) groups is implicated when using class as an analytical concept. In other words, it is anything but neutral. Indeed, Cole, Gay, Sharp, and Glick (1971), studying modes of thought in Liberia, found that schooling teaches far more than facts, mathematics,

or colonial languages. To an extent, similar webs of associations will entangle any set of terminology. The challenge to us is to be conscious of these webs, to help us be explicit and to acknowledge the positionality of our accounts. We have to accept that bias is inevitable, and by being clear about it make it easier for readers to deal with it. My suggestion is that to see how idiosyncratic and partial the European tradition is, it is worth considering how users of other languages approach the same topic, especially speakers of non-Indo-European languages. To this end, in another article I have sketched some of the terms that might feature in a future Mambila anthropology, as a worked example of the possibilities (Zeitlyn 2021*b*). In that companion piece, I consider the ways that Mambila people talk about power and about social groups (where the one English term *group* is expressed in two contrasting Mambila terms *bɔŋ* and *mɔgɔ*), and how these map in interesting ways onto conventional English-language sociological concepts. This points up the artificiality of those 'conventional English-language sociological concepts', suggesting that more helpful alternatives may yet be found. It also makes me anticipate with great interest the eventual publication of a Mambila version of the *Dictionary of untranslatables*, a project not made any easier by the current lack of an obvious Mambila translation for 'untranslatable'! However, I am sure that with time, art, and a lot of hard work, we will be able to come up with a good term.

The point of considering such alternative viewpoints is to encourage caution about the language we use as a comparative sociological metalanguage. Given the impossibility of a neutral position, it is better to recognize this than to pretend otherwise. Just as there is no view from nowhere, nor an undated view (from nowhen), so there is no ideal 'philosopher's language' or 'anthropologist's language' which is free of linguistic biases. One of our tasks is to be as honest as possible about these biases. To that end, contemplating a Mambila anthropology can help. We have to characterize our own accounts in the process of producing them (characterizing others). Reflexively, we need to consider what happens when they characterize us, or when some other others characterize the same others but in different terms. This forces us to think about comparison and commensurability. I suggest 'sparse theory' as a means of achieving this.

As mentioned, there is relevant discussion of these topics in the literature on language ideology (see Woolard's [2020] summary), much of which has been developed in response to Charles Peirce's semiotics. As they would be first to agree, there is a politics to any language or any subset of a language, so, of course, academic anthropology has a language ideology and always will have. My concern is with what Daniel Miller described as 'a discipline such as anthropology, devoted to the comprehension and welfare of people in society, [which is] ultimately served much better by understanding than by cleverness, which merely betrayed the need to express the stories and suffering of others' (2010: 3). In the terms used by Susan Gal and Judith Irvine (2019), Theory (capitalized) has been rhematized (iconized) in a form of fetishization that lauds the creators of Turns (also capitalized). As a sparse theorist, I prefer to eschew such terms and would rather say that on their account the authors of theoretical works appear to accrue greater prestige than those of detailed case studies. Indeed, in contemporary anthropology, it seems that developing a theoretical turn is the easiest way of becoming well known in the profession and securing a prestigious professorial chair. The success of the theory becomes the success of the author, each as it were feeding off the other regardless that they are such different entities. All of which

distracts our attention from the human lives these theories are ostensibly supposed to be helping us comprehend. By selectively deflating and by placing our theoretical cards on the table, I hope we can be more explicit about the language ideology of academic anthropology and its audience (global but tiny) among the 'exam-passing classes' (a phrase Carrithers [2018: 242] attributes to J.I.M. Stewart).

Comparison, commensurability, and translation

I now turn briefly to an example from the Amazon. On the face of it, linguistic exogamy poses a challenge to the idea of ontology as it has recently been used in anthropology, where the assumption has been that each social group has its own ontology. In groups that practise linguistic exogamy, people of a group speaking one language marry those from other groups speaking different languages. Philippe Descola points to a solution: 'It is true that linguistic exogamy is limited to the Tukano tribes, with the exception of the Cubeo, who dispense with it. But all the components of the meta-system subscribe to the same conviction' (2012: 495). In other words, a single wider ontology (a 'meta-system') is shared by all the people concerned. Analysts such as Descola compare many different components (here: related groups in the Amazon speaking different languages) and identify the 'meta-system' they share. This is old-fashioned comparative anthropology as practised by Lévi-Strauss, and before him by Frazer and Maine in the nineteenth century. Anthropologists are key players in this, because they identify and characterize the meta-system, making the shared ontology explicit in ways the participants feel no need to do (although of course they could, if inclined, undertake a Tukano-language anthropology). Comparison is not only a cornerstone of the discipline of anthropology, it is also part of what it is to be human.[8] We all look around at how others do things and sometimes discuss the 'strangely different' ways that other people find to live their lives. Given that all humans compare and generalize, anthropologists should not baulk at doing the same (most anthropologists being, after all, humans).

I suggest that if Descola can characterize the translations undertaken by people in the Amazon when marrying across linguistic boundaries, then so can the rest of us. We are not prisoners of linguistic systems (or ontologies[9]). Although translation may be hard, most of the time we are not having to compare poetic styles but, more mundanely, comparing prices for fruit in the market, trying to work out if there's been a mistake (or if we have been cheated) while trying to assess a good price. As Douglas Hofstadter (2009) suggests, in translation studies, rather than invoking the pejorative slogan 'translator traitor', it might be better to think 'translator trader'. This has the particularly positive benefit of evoking Peter Galison's use of the idea of a 'trading zone' to account for the complex development of science despite internal incommensurability between sub-groups, who manage to get along (more or less) despite their differences. As Galison put it, '[T]rading partners can hammer out a *local* coordination despite vast *global* differences' (1997: 783, his emphasis). Indeed, the process of translation is fraught with decisions, each of which involves both disadvantages and benefits. Translations are always incomplete and improvable: as many have pointed out, translation is a good metaphor for anthropology, given that translation is always possible. Even among the Pirahã, an Amazonian group celebrated (contentiously) for its linguistic sparsity, Daniel Everett has managed to get by in practice. His difficulty in translating some ideas from English into Pirahã, and vice versa, does not mean that translation is impossible. We are not trapped inside conceptual cultural walls: so-called ontologies are not prisons; sometimes heated debate may occur across the boundaries and some individuals

Table 1. Semantic Primes (after Goddard and Wierzbicka)

i, you, someone, something~thing, people, body	substantives
kinds, parts	relational substantives
this, the same, other~else	determiners
one, two, some, all, much~many, little~few	quantifiers
good, bad	evaluators
big, small	descriptors
know, think, want, don't want, feel, see, hear	mental predicates
say, words, true	speech
do, happen, move	actions, events, movement
be (somewhere), there is, be (someone/something)	location, existence, specification
(is) mine	possession
live, die	life and death
when~time, now, before, after, a long time, a short time, for some time, moment	time
where~place, here, above, below, far, near, side, inside, touch	place
not, maybe, can, because, if	logical concepts
very, more	augmentor, intensifier
like	similarity

Sources: Goddard (2018: 9, Fig. 10); see also Goddard & Wierzbicka (2014: 12, Table 1.1).

may span worlds without experiencing cognitive dissonance. Multilingualism does not engender the cognitive dissonance, or worse, implied by extreme theories of incommensurability (allied to arguments for the impossibility of translation). However, we must be open to the possibility that some things are more salient in some traditions than in others, and easier to talk about in some languages than in others (see my comments on 'anthropological translation' above).[10]

At the end of a chapter on scale, Gal and Irvine devote a few pages to commensurability. With Povinelli (2001), they are particularly concerned about power – the key questions for them are who is making a comparison and why? And as they point out, specific forms of commensurability may be questioned without implying that *all* forms of commensurability are impossible (Gal & Irvine 2019: 239). Comparison brings the issue to the fore, including its politics, but systematic, controlled comparison is primarily an academic affair (not that this is without politics). When anthropologists theorize, they might pause to consider how their theoretical constructs work in the traditions (languages) they survey. Because translations are incomplete and improvable, our theories should allow for later additions and improvements. This is a form of mereology (literally, the study of parts, or 'knowing incompleteness'), which I now prefer to call sparse theory.

Anna Wierzbicka has been promoting an approach to these issues for around fifty years, although one that has had surprisingly little influence on social anthropology. She and her colleagues argue for a 'Natural Semantic Metalanguage' (NSM), a highly restricted set of what she calls *Semantic Primes* (the phrase *Semantic Primitives* has also been used), which relate to basic human universals. Consequently, she claims they can be found in every human language.[11] The number of these was originally put at fourteen but has now grown to sixty-five (see Table 1).

As David Parkin (2021) discusses, Wierzbicka has used Semantic Primes to explore and compare some of the 'keyterms' used by different groups.[12] Wierzbicka's (2021) reflection on fifty years of work on NSM spends a lot of time on contentious cases such

as whether every language can talk about something 'having parts'. It may be that the list of primes has to be reduced somewhat, but this doesn't affect the general thrust of her argument that a core set of ideas and related (albeit polysemous) lexemes can be identified, to establish a bridgehead (a limited commensurablity), a common ground from which translation can start. She illustrates her point by discussing how to explain, using only Semantic Primes and a word for 'sell', the condemnation of trade in human body parts. Generalizing, she gives a 'hypothetical 'charter of global ethics' formulated in NSM: 1. It is bad if people want to do bad things to other people. 2. It is bad if people want to do bad things to other people's bodies. 3. It is bad if people want other people to feel something very bad in their bodies (Wierzbicka 2021: 322).

Trading zones and boundary objects

However, Peter Galison (1997) might remind us at this point that translation is not necessary for two or more groups to be able to live together and co-ordinate actions, even if they may not agree on their understandings of those actions! On his account, trading zones can flourish without translation as long as the groups concerned can manage co-ordination without it. One way that this can be achieved is through the use of boundary objects (Star 1989; 2010; Star & Griesemer 1989). I have discussed this in the case of divination (Zeitlyn 2021*a*), seeing the divinatory procedures (the cards, tea-leaves, hexagrams, charts, etc.) as connecting clients, often with immediate pressing concerns, with the diviners and the ontologies associated with the type of divination being used. Boundary objects connect and simultaneously disconnect: they hold connections at a remove, in abeyance. So *clients* can consult divination without necessarily being a party to any ontologies that the *diviners* may associate with it. The procedures and technicalities of divinatory praxis may feature in divinatory consultations as boundary objects, having very different resonances for clients and diviners, who nonetheless are able to continue their interactions, in part through their mutual orientation to the boundary object (divination) being undertaken. As Galison might say, differences of opinion and lack of consensus can be managed by the use of boundary objects in the trading zone, where technologies such as divination allow people to meet and act together without going into detail or discussing whether or not they share an ontology.

Indeed, although general discussion of ontologies may offer solutions to similarly general relativist problems, in practice it swaps one set of problems (e.g. about comprehending radical otherness) for others equally irresolvable. (How many ontologies may one person have, let alone one social group? If a diviner uses many techniques, are they part of many ontologies, one per divination type?) Better to stay with the trouble (to misuse Donna Haraway's 2016 title). 'Ontology' means too many different things to too many of the players, who just shift meanings in response to criticism.[13] Even Martin Holbraad and Morten Axel Pedersen (2017), writing as advocates of the turn, identify five variants,[14] only one of which they promote.

Back to incommensurability[15]

Conceptually, there is a fundamental contradiction in a claim that two positions are incommensurable. For, in order to make the judgement, one must in some sense have comprehended them both, and perhaps been able to compare, if not 'co-measure', them. In that sense, any judgement that two things are incommensurable follows from a process of comparison which implies that they *are* commensurable. However, a different

approach to incommensurability is possible, for which I am indebted to Eva Spies. This starts from the simple observation that thinking in many different ways is common among humans. So, for her, incommensurability can be a way of comprehending the world while avoiding binary judgements. As she puts it:

> With the concept of incommensurability, we attempt to come to terms with situations in which people do *not* appear to refer to a common frame of reference and do *not* feel the need for one practice or view to include or exclude another. Sometimes different ways of doing and seeing things do not stand with or against another – they simply stand side by side (Spies 2013: 123, emphasis added).

On this account, the important thing about incommensurability is the *not*-judging. Indeed, in his discussion of the problem, Richard Handler (2009: 644) identifies different forms of incommensurability such as those created by grammatical/linguistic differences as opposed to those resulting from different social positions. We must recognize a potential aporia: it may be impossible to choose between two views, perspectives, or ways of being in the world. More importantly, it may not be *necessary* to choose between them at all: there is no need to form a judgement. Instead, we can get by with the local co-ordination of the trading zone.[16] This enables us to 'communicate by differences, instead of silencing the Other by presuming a univocality – the essential similarity – between what the Other and We are saying' (Viveiros de Castro 2004*a*: 10). Spies, it seems, is suspicious of Wierzbicka's NSM programme. I think the two can coexist or even work together since the Semantic Primes identified by NSM can be polysemous (univocality need not be presumed) and, as I read them, they are very modest, or, as I prefer to call them, sparse.

In any event, incommensurability encourages acceptance of multiplicity, even though this may be hard to achieve in everyday life. Acceptance of conflicting positions is easier for academics than for people obliged to make decisions outside of ivory towers. Deciding whether or not I should be vaccinated can affect my own health and that of those around me. This sort of decision has a path dependency. Equivocating about whether to have a vaccination or not may be taken as an analogue to the way that beliefs about illness can be treated as incommensurable. However, despite the connections between the two, the act of vaccination (or the withholding, the active refraining from having it) cannot be equivocal: one cannot undo the action and regain the state of being unvaccinated. We need to be clear that any putative incommensurability applies not to actions (or withholdings), but to the explanations (narratives) given to explain and justify our decisions.

Sparse theory

So, finally, to sparse theory. As Jane Guyer puts it, written ethnographies

> as 'lines on the page' seem very spare and sparse by comparison with the lived complexities, the more massive asymmetries, and the analytical gridlocks that provoked them. One advantage of spareness is that it also reveals what is absent, rather than cluttering the canvas so completely that the last thing one needs is yet another idea (2004: 170).

Michael Carrithers covers some of the same ground in his discussion of ethnographic narratives, which are shot through with or scaffolded by 'low-key theory' (2018: 244).

Latinate words are used to distinguish the terms of an explanation (the explanans) from what is being explained (the explanandum). However, these are frequently confused, especially when natural languages (not designed for academic research) are used reflexively as their own metalanguages.[17] Consider accounts of 'belief'. In trying

to explain belief (in other words, if *belief* is the explanandum), logically we cannot use it in the explanation (as the explanans) because that would be tautologous, merely restating the problem. Even when using different terms, if the putative explanation is as complicated as the thing being explained, then it is not an explanation (answering a question) but only a re-description of the problem (a re-posing of the question). There are dangers in simplification, especially where a simple account fails to characterize the problem adequately. The challenge is to achieve a satisfying characterization: in other words, some form of clarity. The real (and delicate) conundrum is how to be clear and analytically precise about vague and unclear situations. Too often, when reading an anthropological publication, I cannot tell whether the lack of clarity is in the social world being described or in the office of the author.

I suggest that, rather than attempting to refine and reform unwieldy some terms of analysis which may have two thousand years of work and much baggage associated with them, sometimes it is preferable to do without them.[18]

At the very least, it is worth asking what an anthropology would be like without some current key theoretical terms. What might anthropology be like if we abstained from using some of the complicating words which have a tendency to mislead? This is an exercise in rigour. It is not be practicable to avoid *all* the terms below, but it is worth trying to do without some, at least as a thought experiment, and possibly even in practice.

Some candidates for heuristic abstention:

believe/belief
meaning
the world
representation
realism
relativism.

Such a list is somewhat arbitrary, reflecting my prejudices and sense of frustration with some research programmes. It could be vastly expanded. The point is not to be definitive but to suggest that anthropology could be practised with very different sets of analytic terms. However, I note that the terms in this list might all be classed as 'wicked concepts' (on the model of 'wicked problems') or 'essentially contested concepts', and hence poorly fitted for use as explanatory terms in comparative analysis. 'Wicked problems' (Rittel & Webber 1973; see also Lane & Woodman 2000) are a version of 'essentially contested concepts' (Gallie 1956).[19] The definitional paradigm case of a wicked problem is airport expansion. Consider Heathrow Airport to the west of London, where issues of engineering, politics, environmental concerns, and business pressures all converge. The interested parties cannot all be satisfied by any outcome. Similarly, people with different understandings of what words like 'freedom' or 'democracy' mean are at best condemned to argue across each other. To rephrase W.B. Gallie's argument, the concepts in question are what Susan Leigh Star (1989) called 'boundary objects', the concepts that span divides and that provide the substance of debate, argument, and division, yet provide ways to make bridges across the divides enabling the discussions to continue. As such, they are/should be explananda, not explanans. Indeed, as Gallie argues, it would be a category mistake to think that the problems can be resolved by perfect definitions. Since definitional issues are caught up with political entanglements,

consensus is impossible. As analysts, we should pick explanatory or analytical terms which are less contentious, and seek to couch our arguments in less sensational, and knowingly incomplete, ways. As far as possible, our terms of analysis should not be wicked or essentially contested, so as to leave room for political and other uses. This will enable a sparse anthropology which is clearer than current practice. Sparse anthropology seeks to be clear about what is being explored, in what terms and to what purposes.

This approach is only reductionist in the trivial sense of wanting to reduce the number and vagueness of our analytical terms. We need to be clear and consistent about how we document vague and changeable words/ideas in everyday life (which is full of vagueness and change). We should aspire to use a vocabulary of relatively simple concepts to give limited (incomplete or partial) accounts of more complex ones. Neologisms need not be avoided, but if we neologize we should specify which old terms are being dropped in favour of the new ones. Martin Holbraad's (2011) 'ontography' is a case in point.[20]

In a defence of neologisms, Jan Blommaert discusses whether to replace 'context' in sociolinguistics with 'chronotope'. He says:

> One answer is general and refers to a practice that is at the core of scientific work. We need new terms, or renewed terms, often for no other reason than to check the validity of old ones. Neologisms, from that angle, are crucial critical *Gedankenspiele* that remind us of the duty of continuous quality control of our analytical vocabulary. And if the *Gedankenspiel* is played well, it often enables us to see how the existing concepts they critically interrogate have become flattened, turned into a *passe-partout* or a rather uninformative routine gesture in talk and writing. Chronotope invites us to critically check the ways in which we use the term 'context' in a wide range of disciplines within the study of language in society. If, in the end, the community of peers in this discipline decide that 'context' is still more useful and valuable than 'chronotope', it will be a much more accurate, precise and analytically transparent notion of 'context' that will prevail, and 'chronotope' will have done its work (Blommaert 2018: 2).

Blommaert is suggesting replacing one theoretical term with another, rather than increasing the overall total. All too often, however, neologisms are added without rivals being dropped. I fear that merely adding to the pool of available analytical terms does not help the process of analysis. In the spirit of sparseness, the four-word sparse abstract of this article is: say less more clearly.

Exemplary plain writing

There follow four exemplars of the sort of ethnographic writing I find helpful: Sandra Calkins (2016), David Gauntlett (2007), Harry West (2007), and Peter Metcalf (2002).

Sandra Calkins (2016) explores the lived reality of being on the margins of starvation in North-Eastern Sudan. She helps us understand that *uncertainty* may be universal but its consequences are very unevenly distributed between and among groups. Among the unacknowledged riches of the developed world is the background luxury that makes uncertainty a philosophical rather than an existential conundrum (which eclipses most other intellectual activity).

West reflects on the epistemic status of statements about Mueda witchcraft made by him, his informants, and other Mozambican colleagues. He asks what he and his readers should do when told that sorcery lions are not metaphors but real (West 2007: 5). His book is about the dilemmas involved in taking radically opposing views seriously, including positions which reject those of their rivals, claiming exclusivity or a monopoly on the truth. He demonstrates the fleet-footedness of anthropologists in side-stepping

the more brutal contradictions, exemplifying what I have described elsewhere (Zeitlyn 2022) as a condition of *ironic detachment*.[21]

Gauntlett (2007: 51) uses other metaphors; from Nancy Cartwright he gets a 'dappled world', where 'the laws that describe this world are a patchwork not a pyramid' (1999: 52).[22] He uses the deceptively prosaic activity of building models in Lego to explore higher realms of personal identity theory. He worked with informants who built Lego models to help them demonstrate what they were like as individuals, and how others have misconstrued this. He raises challenges for theory by delicately and sensitively using his discussions with the Lego builders about how and why their models reveal aspects of their identity. For example, a key finding (Gauntlett 2007: 188 and 195) is a 'will to coherence': it seems as if the individuals are fighting back against dividuality, asserting their unity against all odds. Of course, anthropologists will want to see parallel studies from different places around the world, and, granted this conclusion, we would especially want cases from Melanesian societies, where dividuality was identified by Maurice Leenhardt (1979 [1947]) before being taken up by Marilyn Strathern (2004). Gauntlett's method is amenable to radical ethnographic reinterpretation that may not involve Lego at all. For example, conversations about body painting or ritual mask making in Melanesia could lead to discussion of the same topics covered by Gauntlett and his informants.

Metcalf, in his wonderfully titled retrospective ethnography *They lie, we lie* (2002), gives a beautifully written account of the dilemmas and joys of fieldwork and its analysis, sensitive to the dilemmas of representation and contemporary theory and sceptical of the ambitions of high theory. His subtitle, *Getting on with anthropology*, reflects his refusal to allow theoretical conundrums to impede the strange challenges of fieldwork encounters and the ways anthropologists make sense of them. Discussing ethnicity, he refers to the work of Stuart Hall, who

> argues that any monolithic conception of 'black' identity is subverted by taking account of the way that the work of Afro-Caribbean writers and film makers is socially and historically 'positioned'. Although ethnic histories have their own reality and are 'not mere tricks of the imagination', they tend to fix identities in a 'straight, unbroken line, from some fixed origin' (Hall 1996: 113) …

What I have called the ethnographic perspective is, at its best, an example of mobile positioning. What the ethnographer can do, in a way that it is very hard for any particular informant to do, is shift the point of vantage repeatedly, placing first this ethnicity in the foreground, and then another, within some fairly restricted field. None of this is to deny the subject positioning of the ethnographer, nor to disclaim that 'objectification' is the result, as much as 'objectivity'. It is simply the best that can be done. The world is not paved with ethnic groups, but the alternative is not to refuse to see cultural variation, like the 'see no evil' monkey. In the nineteenth century, the standard tactic of explorers was … to generalize broadly about the 'Dayaks'. For the ethnographer of Borneo, such a flattening of cultural difference, such a blind suppression of the jumbled, knotty, unfolding complexity of Upriver life, would be the greatest lie of all (Metcalf 2002: 106-7).

Some links to mereology

The practice of theoretical parsimony and sparse theory fosters modesty. Clearly, all accounts are incomplete: we cannot explain everything, and it is hubristic to think that we can. Sparse theory recognizes incompleteness as a positive. Elsewhere (Zeitlyn

2009; Zeitlyn & Just 2014), I argued for partial, incomplete accounts, valuing a *knowing* incompleteness. My use of the term 'mereology' (inspired by Strathern's use of merology for the nesting of parts within wholes [1992: 73; 2005 (1991): xxix]) may not have been helpful: indeed, sparse theory suggests that it should be dropped!

Sparse theory has additional implications. First, the terms of explanation should be different from the terms being explained[23] and, contentiously, they should be simpler or else there is no explanation. As Bruce Connell pointed out to me, this again raises the question of metalanguage. Lexicography is a helpful model: a dictionary headword must be defined (explained) using different terms, to avoid circular definitions.

Returning to the example of a possible Mambila anthropology: there is no analytical necessity to use any one language, or its vocabulary or grammatical categories, to describe different social groups and how they understand the world, rather than any of the seven thousand other languages currently spoken. If an anthropology based on a different linguistic metalanguage were to characterize a social phenomenon very differently from the Anglophone version, that should at least give us pause for thought. How much of anthropology is an artefact of the languages in which it is couched? I suspect *some* of it, although the empiricist in me adds *not all*. The challenge is to find ways to assess what is implied by the terms in which we think and what those terms refer to, no matter how poorly the languages at our disposal may characterize the worlds to which our words are connected.

Is sparse theory tantamount to reductionism? Is it bad reductionism? Increasingly, I want to add the words 'reductionism' and, more importantly, 'explanation' to the list of terms best avoided. If we cannot be sure what counts as an explanation, then perhaps we should stop so assiduously calling for one (see Viveiros de Castro 2004*b*: 483 fn. 36). On the other hand, ethnographies such as those cited above demonstrate by example that anthropological practice, including fieldwork encounters and reflection upon them, can result in characterizations that are rigorous, comparative, and enlightening. That is a worthy goal for anthropology.

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NOTES

[1] It is likely that the Tower of Babel would have had something like bamboo scaffolding. Should an engineer be asked to reconsider its rebuilding, this piece may form part of the preface from their report.

[2] I take the term from Anna Wierzbicka, whose work is discussed below.

[3] To be explicit, I take the readers of this article (and this journal) to be academic anthropologists and their students, my colleagues at large.

[4] A point made forcibly by Richard Handler (2009: 638).

[5] This was one of Charles Hockett's (controversial) language 'design features'; he calls it 'reflexiveness' (1977: 173). Nuckolls & Swanson (2018) stress variation in meta-linguistic resources and reflexivity (see also other chapters in Proust & Fortier 2018).

[6] Translated into American English as the *Dictionary of untranslatables* (Cassin 2014 [2004]), and now also available in several other languages, not only European ones.

[7] This figure is taken from Simons & Fennig (2018). Moore, Pietikäinen & Blommaert (2010) discuss the dangers of counting languages. I also note that Hindu tradition holds the Sanskrit language to be perfect and hence the ideal universal metalanguage.

[8] Candea has been discussing comparison for several years (see, e.g., 2016 and 2019, the latter only available to me very late in the writing process). Another important recent work is Deville, Guggenheim & Hrdlićková (2016).

[9] The connection with ontologies takes us in a different direction (see Zeitlyn 2014; 2021a).

[10] This is a weak interpretation of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. See Whorf (1940) for the classic statement.

[11] This has led to some rather ill-tempered, *ad hominen* exchanges with Dan Everett about basic number concepts in the Pirahã. As far as I can tell from the published experimental evidence (e.g. Everett & Madora 2012), Everett and his collaborators have not demonstrated the absence of the contentious concepts at issue.

[12] Although Parkin (2021: 245) is more concerned to stress the possibility of the variation in salience of a keyword within a cultural tradition, one of his examples being the decline in the use of *Heimat* in German in the second half of the twentieth century. I note that his analysis of the changing meanings of the Luo term *chira* does not use Wierzbicka's Semantic Primes.

[13] See, for example, Pedersen (2012) for a masterclass in such deft footwork.

[14] They should be grateful the number is not higher. It is worth noting that Margaret Masterman (1970: 61-5) identified twenty-two different meanings of the word *paradigm* in Thomas Kuhn's *The structure of scientific revolutions* (1962)!

[15] Parts of this section come from Zeitlyn (2022).

[16] Other ways of considering this issue include Nurit Bird-David's (2008) bifocality and Viveiros de Castro's (2004) controlled equivocation.

[17] Notwithstanding Hockett's (1977) metaphorical talk of 'design features', languages were not designed, full stop.

[18] Consider the early discussion of how unhelpful the term 'tribe' is, leading Aidan Southall to report that: 'I have expunged the term tribe from my anthropological lexicon' (1975: 274; see also Fried 1975; Southall 1970). Simply replacing 'tribe' with 'ethnic group' does not solve anything.

[19] Since one idea comes from engineering and the other from political philosophy, it is unsurprising that the concept of wicked problems was developed independently of its precursor. However, the basic point is the same.

[20] Holbraad acknowledges that he is not the first to use the term. Bogost (2012) traces it back to M.R. James in the nineteenth century.

[21] In a previous discussion, Roger Just and I talked of 'bad faith' (Zeitlyn & Just 2014: 125-6), although I am persuaded that this is unnecessarily pejorative.

[22] Cartwright also encourages us to develop 'methodologies for life in the messy world which we invariably inhabit' (1999: 18). The Editors point out that Gauntlett is using one of my list of terms to avoid, but rather than being singular as in 'the world', he stresses the mess and the dappling which to my mind blur and pluralize the worlds he is describing.

[23] This immediately raises a problem for native ethnography or autoethnography: it is easy to become confused when using a language as its own metalanguage. For example, when discussing 'belief in the United Kingdom', it can be unclear whether the term 'belief' is the local term being analysed or the analytical concept deployed to explain it.

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Plaidoyer pour la parcimonie

Résumé

L'auteur examine l'influence du langage utilisé dans l'analyse anthropologique (le métalangage). S'il existe, sur le principe, au moins autant d'anthropologies qu'il y a de langues, il nous faut envisager la possibilité qu'il y ait près de sept mille anthropologies plus ou moins incommensurables. Une telle incommensurabilité n'est cependant pas obligatoire: non seulement le principe de parcimonie aide à

la comparaison, mais il peut aussi contribuer à créer une commensurabilité partielle (incomplète). L'application du principe de parcimonie permet une approche claire des idées, même lorsque celles-ci sont floues. S'il faut, pour cela, se dispenser de quelques termes d'analyse à la mode, le résultat en vaut la peine. Bref, nous devrions tous en dire moins, et le dire plus clairement.

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