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**Logics of agreement.
Quine's naturalism between pragmatism
and a Derridean *impasse***

1. Rorty on Quine: why neo-pragmatism needs to examine essential structures

A demanding reading of the chapter about *Privileged Representations* and *Epistemology and Psychology* of Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the mirror of the nature*¹ can convey the sensation that the greatest resource, on the one hand, and the greatest weakness, on the other hand, of the neo-pragmatist's work is the deep co-implication – which it develops – of the concepts of the scientificity of an investigation and the particular intellectual purpose of such investigation. For the idea of such a co-implication is able to back up the distinctly pragmatist and anti-representationalist view Rorty intends to foster as well as its opposite.

In such chapter, in fact, Rorty recalls Willard Quine's solution to the issue of what is called “epistemological justification”, claiming that this latter's attempts to overcome and “replace” the epistemological value traditionally attributed to linguistic “obscure entities” through the assertion whereby a sentence or a theory «A is epistemologically prior to [a sentence] B if A is causally nearer than B to the sensory receptors»² produces a theoretical fallacy. According to Quine, «if we are seeking only the causal mechanism of our knowledge of the external world, and not a justification of that knowledge in terms prior to science [...] we can look upon man as a black box in the physical world, exposed to externally determinable stimulatory

¹ See Rorty (1979).

² Ivi, p. 85.

forces as input and spouting externally determinable testimony about the external world as output»³.

Rorty is consistent with his own neo-pragmatist assertion, whereby any “objective” observation and scientific theory is a matter of “conversationally shared forces”, when he comments on Quine’s position by claiming that, if there are indeed no epistemological criteria to establish what real data are, Quine’s suggestion «does not resolve a dilemma which has plagued epistemology. Rather, it lets epistemology wither away»⁴. In effect, according to Rorty, we simply have, on the one hand, things such as the conversationally agreed system of forces which coincides with the observation data and theoretical parameters of what we call “psychophysiology”, in order to “cover causal mechanisms” – or, better, in order to spread within a community the language-game and forces-game established through the creation of a certain way of moving our forces and of arranging our “world”, which we call “verification of causal mechanisms”. And we have, on the other hand, things such as “sociology and history of science” to note the occasions in which the conversationally agreed systems of forces which coincides with observation sentences «are invoked or dodged in construction and dismantling theories»⁵. If this is the case, therefore, when we draw a distinction between what is “given” and what is “inferred” and when we arrange a relation between physiological stimuli, data and observation sentences, we are simply structuring a discourse, an agreed and useful system of forces which we take as coinciding with the total perception of our “experience”. We would not state a relation between our knowledge and an objective “external world” but, to recall Quine’s definition, we would rather conversationally elaborate ourselves as being a certain “black box” through the elaboration of a certain – “contingent” – discourse which coincides with our “world”. We may talk, Rorty says, «about irradiated patches on

³ Ivi, p. 224.

⁴ Ivi, p. 255.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

a two-dimensional retina or pulses on the optic nerve, but this will be a matter of choosing a black box, not of discovering touchstones for inquiry»⁶.

This is a point, though, where we sense a conflagration in Rorty's co-implication of what is, for him, the scientificity of a theory, the purpose of a science and the tradition which is typically engaged in achieving such a purpose. For Rorty ascertains an ontological equivalence between what, for a tradition, is "epistemologically justified" and what is read, by an author, as a "historical narrative". He thinks of philosophical and scientific problems as «artifacts of a historically contingent, hence optional, constellation of ideas»⁷ and strongly denies «what Quine called "essentialism" – the notion that one could distinguish between what people were talking about and what they were saying about it by discovering the essence of the object being discussed»⁸. According to him, therefore, any "conversation within a community" is an issue of shaping and defining a certain "field of forces", a structure which, for instance, we call "objectivity" when it is largely shared among individuals.

This would be, in the end, what any intellectual tradition concerns: dealing with such structures of forces in order to reach a purpose. Once an ontological equivalence among «conversations» of different traditions is stated, though, the validity of Quine's commitment can only be negated if we demonstrate that there is the danger that his method will be able to betray his "tradition" purpose – or, if we want to attain to the very tradition supported by Rorty, if we demonstrate that Quine's method would be useless or harmful for the community it is applied to.

The question which needs to be answered in order to assess Rorty's assessment of Quine's approach is, therefore: does Rorty's argumentation succeed in doing one of these two things?

⁶ *Ibidem.*

⁷ Guignon, Hiley (2003), p. 62.

⁸ Rorty (1979), p. 268.

Has Quine's purpose «to establish a certain conceptual scheme of the world whose capacity is to arrange and fit the disordered fragment of sense data»⁹ been evaluated in respect of its own internal coherence or, rather, in some "legalistic sort of way" – with strict adherence to the coherence of Rorty's language? A way whereby Quine's notions as "causal proximity" and "matters of fact" lose the function they were created for and, therefore, their legitimacy?

Rorty's criticism of Quine's notions of "neural input" and "information" can fulfil its own task only by showing that Quine's language, while talking about these scientific frameworks, fails to refer to "objects" – fields of forces – which would effectively exist as long as they are structured by and coinciding with an agreement within "Quine's" community – the community of scientists, for instance; or the community of those who think that the world "can be completely described in an extensional language". But once we recognise that Quine is proposing a methodology whereby «the predicates appropriate to science are those which expedite the purposes of intersubjective confirmation and theoretical clarity and simplicity»¹⁰, and we clarify it through the terminology we have used so far by identifying in "clarity" and "simplicity" a manifestation of very shared and "less changing" structures of forces throughout the tradition of a community, it is hard to see how could Rorty's remarks do so. The very purpose of Quine's "regimentation of language" as methodology, in fact, is to recommend the use of the tools – syntax, logic, words – coinciding with the forces which would be able to make the regularities, the linearity and the agreements present among the structures of forces which we and our environment are "stand out" the most.

From a Quinean point of view, such an attempt to make this "agreement of structures" show up within a community – or within a human's relation to her environment – is not different

⁹ Quine (1963), p. 16.

¹⁰ Quine (1966), p. 232.

from the motion of making “constant” structures of forces emerge. The greater reality of bodies, data or objects Quine talks about, therefore, would refer to such a bigger agreement and regularity among forces and, consequently, to the actual existence of such constant structures among a community. It is important to note that when we say that Quine’s method aims at this from “his point of view” it means that it is the structures of forces which coincide with “Quine’s community” which is formed and operating in order to pursue that purpose, the purpose of making “constant structures of forces” arise.

To specify “from a Quinean point of view” does not mean that there is another point of view within which such an “agreement of structures” is interpreted in a right or different way. It means that another point of view would operate and would be formed in order to pursue another kind of agreement among forces, an agreement – like Rorty’s – which does not necessarily involve the “constant structures” typical of Quine’s own tradition. In order to criticize Quine’s tradition, therefore, a neo-pragmatist, holistic, “ironist” and historicist attitude cannot and should not blame Quine’s purpose and its presuppositions as such but, rather, it should examine whether such a purpose may lead to an unsatisfactory situation, whether because of the facts that “constant structures of forces” only emerge in a very problematic way or because the consideration of these structures cannot, in any case, coincide with an “useful” kind of agreement.

The recall to “two different kinds” of agreement to underline the legitimacy of Quine’s method specificity in respect to Rorty’s may seem puzzling. But it is actually consistent with Rorty’s own rejection of “essentialism” in order to evaluate the pragmatic suitability or “utility” of a community purpose. An “essentialist” tendency, in this case, would be one which would interpret the field of forces operating and enhanced by Quine’s method – within “Quine’s human environment” – through the parameters and the context of forces typical of another human environment. As Rorty says, by referring to Quine’s own illustration of the “first dogma of empiricism”: «[essentialism is]

the notion that one could distinguish between what people were talking about and what they were saying about it by discovering the essence of the object being discussed»¹¹.

Once we accept – as Rorty should suggest to us – what “Quine’s” intellectual environment is talking about – and not what this environment “would be really talking about”¹² – would we still find a notion like “observation predicate” seen as product of intersubjectivity¹³ being in contradiction with the idea of depicting a real structure of reality? In *Philosophy and the mirror of the nature* Rorty appears to blame Quine’s reference to notions like “stimuli”, “information” or “observations” as some sort of epistemological essentialism, but he omits to deeply analyze, as we would expect, the pragmatic level and purpose of such “essences”. Rorty does not demonstrate how Quine’s conception of agreement would be likely to produce inconsistencies with its own purpose – that is to say, with the final pragmatic benefits as considered by “Quinean” community. Rorty does not take into account, in other words, what the “essences” of Quine’s “essentialism” and of his own “anti-essentialism” are pragmatically supposed to be.

Pragmatically considered, for instance, experiencing “causal mechanisms” can be seen as coincident with being within a field of forces whereby a kind of agreement within a community manifests itself through certain configurations revealing themselves to be necessary to appear for certain structures transformations to occur. Quine’s consideration of causal proximity as pragmatic substitute of classic epistemological justification, similarly, can be seen as the research of the most linear, the clearest and simplest – and, therefore, most “stable”

¹¹ Rorty (1979), p. 268.

¹² See *ivi*, pp. 266-270.

¹³ «The mark of an observation predicate is, roughly speaking, agreement among speakers of a language in their dispositions to apply the predicate to or withhold it from demonstrated items on the basis of their current observations of those items. This notion of *observation predicate* is drawn from the biological-psychological theory of language to which Carnap alludes in “Testability and Meaning.”» (Ricketts 2004, p. 198).

and most likely to be “objects of agreement” – configuration or connection between the field of forces we call “stimulations of our sensory receptors” and the one we call “sentences”. Quine’s “essentialism” would be, in effect, his being rigorous in searching the underlying structures of forces which are most constant and most likely to be shared among human beings; his undertaking a rigorous (“scientific”) research on the implicit structures of agreement which characterizes a world or a human tradition. Such a vision of what essentialism is would even agree with a holistic conception of reality as a relation of forces which do not own an intrinsic feature. The non-existence of an intrinsic feature, in fact, would not be at odds with the existence of a constant or more constant structures of forces.

If “pragmatism” is a conception whereby we act according to our being (in) a position within a field of forces, a pragmatic justification of the real existence of something and of an “essential” structure disregards any need of referring to an a priori ontology in order to state the degree of “reality” of a structure of forces. The real existence of something is, we can say, “produced” by the constancy, diffusion of a configuration of forces – which makes terms such as “real” or “illusory” tools to indicate the degree of some elements in bringing agreement and, therefore, of the underlying diffusion and “structurality” of their configurations: «What then does our overall scientific theory really claim regarding the world? Only that it is somehow so structured as to assure the sequences of stimulation that our theory gives us [sic] to expect»¹⁴.

Rorty anti-essentialism – his dismissing any resort to an intrinsic ontology – would need to get in depth in the essential examination which a rigorous pragmatic achievement of his own purpose would require, without favouring his own criteria of “legitimacy” in respect to the very pragmatic privilege and legitimacy – which we find in Quine – of the existence of “matter of facts”, “stimulations”, “information processing” and

¹⁴ Bayer (2009), § 3.

of their “limning the ultimate structures of reality”. As B. Bayer comments the passage we have just quoted:

In mentioning the structuring here, Quine might mean that we refer to underlying essences which somehow order our sensations, as in a two-factor theory of reference. But what is important for Quine, who disavows the naturalistic respectability of natural kinds, is that any number of possible reference schemes can exhibit the same structure. There is a fine line, then, between the possibility of the world’s exhibiting the same structure through many different ontologies, and our experience having the same structure, regardless of the world’s ontology. When speaking on the meta-level, it is hard to see whether the naturalized epistemologist is committed to structural realism or simply to phenomenalism¹⁵.

A pragmatic approach leads us, here, to a pragmatic foundation and explanation of what would be the essential, underlying structures of agreement according to Quine’s community and purpose¹⁶. Rorty, by contesting that certain

¹⁵ *Ibidem.*

¹⁶ This point of view about a pragmatic justification of the belief in more constant and structural configurations of forces within a world – which we can highlight by an analysis on how the pragmatic structures and implications typical of our own context behave – can be put into dialogue, for instance, with Robert Brandom neo-pragmatic rehabilitation of the “representational dimension of the semantic content”: «The claim developed and defended here is that representational locutions should be understood as making explicit certain features of communicating by claiming – the interpersonal giving and asking for reasons. The context within which concern with what is thought and talked about arises is the assessment of how the judgments of one individual can serve as reason for another. The thesis is that the representational dimension of propositional content is conferred on thought and talk by the social dimension of the practice of giving and asking for reasons. Logicians typically think of inference as involving only relations among different interlocutors. However, discursive practice, the giving and asking for reasons, from which inferential relations are abstracted, involves both intercontent and interpersonal dimension» (Brandom 1994, p. 395). From our perspective, Brandom’s practice of “interpersonal giving and asking for reasons” can be understood as the process of making the most stable and sharable configurations of forces which are underlying or “potentially present” within our context stand out. Or, also, as the action of

typologies of languages are more in contact with real data and sensory irradiations – because any different arrangement of the given-inferred distinction would be an equivalent holistic vocabulary describing the world – is only reaffirming that there can be different communities and vocabularies beyond Quine's. But because of his shirking engaging himself with a structural analysis of the possibilities of success-failure of Quine's language and purpose – an analysis which for its very being “structural” would have been, in effect, despised by Rorty as presupposing a general structural nature or essence of language – the neo-pragmatist philosopher is unable to propose a kind of language or logic which displays itself as careful and rigorous in taking into account the purely pragmatist aim of creating agreement within a community. Or, at least, he does not show himself to be more able in this than Quine.

Rorty, in other words, seems to direct his argumentation to legitimize his conception of holism – whereby distinctions such

making explicit the hidden underlying regularities which “determine” our context configurations.

In spite of his rejection of holism – because of its denying the possibility of a “view from outside” and, thus, of a “meaning-theory” as a study of how we represent reality through language (Heck, Dummett 1998, p. 96) – we can suggest that even in Dummett's vision of a theory of meaning one can find a hint at a similar pragmatist justification of the notions like verification: «A verificationist meaning-theory must be able to derive the consequences of a statement from its content as determined by what verifies it. Correspondingly, a pragmatist meaning theory must be able to derive, from the content of a statement, as determined by its consequences, what is to count as verifying it. In both cases, the derivation will guarantee harmony within the language as a whole between the two aspects of linguistic practice» (Dummett 1991, p. 320). In this case, the necessity of «deriving what is to count as verifying a statement» – or the necessity of a «model of meaning be a model of understanding, i.e. a representation of what is known when an individual knows meaning» (Rahman, Primiero, Marion 2011, p. 121) – can be read as needs of “making the most stable and sharable configurations of forces which are underlying or “potentially present” within our context stand out”. The “effect” produced by such more constant configurations standing out is “harmony within the language as a whole” between a verificationist and pragmatist practice.

as between «given» and «postulated» are never legitimized – more than to pursue a “genuine” pragmatist purpose. He seems, namely, to focus his passages on justifying, paradoxically, an essence of the language and of the world. This is a paradox because this latter concern substitutes, in Rorty’s criticism of Quine’s kind of pragmatism, what we have denominated as a more appropriate essential examination of the “vocabulary” in use; namely as a structural analysis of the dynamic and configuration of forces of a determinate context in order to evaluate the most suitable language to achieve – or to “outline” – an agreement and, also, a sharing of benefits within a certain human tradition. It is interesting to note, in this way, that Rorty turns out to be not essentialist enough in his pragmatic analysis because of his being too essentialist in his “ontological” one.

2. Quine’s search for common grounds as an ethical prudence

It is important to underline, now, how the concept of “purpose of a tradition” – as we have articulated it throughout the contamination of Rorty’s and Quine’s language – carries a distinct purport. We can interpret it, in fact, as the very general sense – in its “universal” validity, we dare to say – of the purpose of pursuing a more suitable vision of reality which would allow us to dwell in the world in a “better way”, mostly by tracing an agreement as large as possible – within ourselves or our community – about what are the values we deal with and what they should become to be more likable.

If we are “Rortyan” we perceive that, within our community, a honest survey of a greater agreement is pursued by arguing in favour of a holistic structure of reality which essentially does not admit any reason for epistemological premises or data-hypotheses distinctions. We perceive that «anything could be made to look good or bad, important or unimportant, useful or useless, by being redescribed»¹⁷ and, therefore, we try to track the most “agreeable” description which can exist within a context. An essential analysis of what possibilities the structures

¹⁷ Rorty (1989), p. 7.

of forces we live in can offer us is carried out in such a specific way.

The “same” essential analysis ends up assuming different connotations if we live within a community – like Quine’s – in which individuals agree that the structures of forces we live in can offer us the possibilities of outlining specific constant values we would be able to lean on. Such an agreement among individuals would not be an a priori epistemological point of view but, circularly, a “realization” of what the pursuing of that general sense of the purpose of tracing “an agreement as large as possible about what are the values we deal with” effectively tells us within our specific tradition and environment. That is to say that, if Quine’s “general” purpose is to search the possibilities and the conditions of a greater agreement, it can only be an effective measurement of such an agreement within an environment which pushes Quine to consider certain structures as carrying a greater linearity, constancy and clarity. In order to assert that the vagueness and untidiness of the common man’s ontology is cleared away with the technical instrument of first-order predicate logic with identity, or “canonical notation”, Quine must have necessarily perceived and verified that within a specific context – which may have been his intersubjective experience with his “common men’s” community as much as with his community of logicians – a tendency exists whereby, for instance, the sentence “Tom believes that Cicero denounced Catiline” would be clearer and more widely understandable in a, respectively, nonreferential sense, referential in regard to Cicero and referential one in regard to both Cicero and Catiline if its opaque meaning is formulated and examined in the following logical syntax

Tom believes [Cicero denounced Catiline],
Tom believes x [x denounced Catiline] of Cicero,
Tom believes xy [x denounced y] of Cicero and Catiline¹⁸.

¹⁸ Quine (1960), pp. 148-167.

Rorty does not commit himself to object to the possibility of greater agreements like this; he does not show, in any case, why this method would be fallacious in order to produce a more agreeable vision of reality. In his contesting that the world can be completely described in such logical languages while it can also – given its holistic structure – be equivalently described in a purely intensional one¹⁹, he neglects the entire discussion about the “very general sense” of the purpose of a “tradition” as “pursuing a more suitable vision of reality mostly by tracing an as large as possible agreement about what the values we deal with and what they should become to be more likable are”. Rorty fails to recognize that within Quine’s method and intellectual environment the research of «the most stable and sharable configurations of forces which are underlying or “potentially present” within our context» is effectively measured as the most efficacious technique to reach the purpose above. He does not take into account such a possible efficacy in the use of languages like extensional logic or, for instance, in the analysis of «perceptual similarity of the global stimuli»²⁰ in order to determine an agreement within a community about “what are the values we deal with” and, consequently, an easier agreement about “what they should become to be more likable”.

Rorty overlooks a critical analysis of the harmony and the agreement within a language community to which a consideration of concepts such as “global stimuli”, “general expectation”, “observation sentences” seems to commit itself in order to depict a sharable – and, therefore, justifiable – “structure of reality”, made of nerve endings, stimuli, observations and developments of scientific laws²¹. The theoretical function of notions as “observation categoricals” and the other Quine’s “naturalist” concepts is to convey a certain method to make the underlying structures harmony and constancy among individuals stand out in the simplest and

¹⁹ See Rorty (1979), p. 204.

²⁰ See Quine (1998), § II.

²¹ See *Ibidem*.

clearest way. A method using scientific languages capable of talking, in the most unambiguous and least vague way, about when «all members of a language community are disposed to agree on the truth or falsity of [...] a sentence on the spot, if they have normal perception»²² and of using such determination as a criterion for constructing the most suitable vision of the reality.

If we want to evaluate such criteria efficacy, we would need to identify our argumentations with a model of rationality – such as Quine’s – whereby, for instance, an assessment of decisions about human conduct or explicitly aesthetic and ethical values is perceived as too unclear and, therefore, an onerous, delicate task for a philosophical investigation: «inspirational and edifying writing is admirable, but the place for it is the novel, the poem, the sermon, or the literary essay. Philosophers in the professional sense have no peculiar fitness for it. Neither have they peculiar fitness for helping to get society on an even keel, though we should all do what we can»²³. Such a model of rationality, whereby the greatest hope to set up an agreeable model of reality is to be fulfilled through a “maximization of clarity and objectivity” of our respective perceptions and “ontological commitments”²⁴, is likely to sense the danger that the practice of «making the vocabulary one favours look attractive by showing how it may be used to describe a variety of topics»²⁵ may turn out to be a random, arbitrary imposition or a dosage of palliative convictions. This model of rationality would propose, rather, a survey of the most shared “structures of forces” within a context, in order to rigorously outline a common ground, so to make misunderstandings less frequent and human cooperation more efficient – so to make, in other words, the attempt to “do what we can” easier.

²² Ivi, p. 22.

²³ Quine (1981), p. 193.

²⁴ See Hylton (2007), p. 12.

²⁵ Rorty (1989), p. 9.

3. Derrida and “agreement” as a contingent modality of reciprocal roles

Once this understanding of Quine’s intellectual purpose and of its relation with the “general sense” of a tradition purpose sketched above is hypothesized, one cannot ignore that the problem of how to evaluate the efficacy and suitability of a similar position has become more puzzling. And this is because of the very factor which is overlooked by Rorty: the necessity of studying the particular analysis of the essential structures «of agreement» of reality and of language typical of Quine’s contingent context, in its very specificity and uniqueness. We find ourselves, in fact, in front of a paradoxical determination of what should we consider as an “investigation about the essential structures of reality”, because what is classically seen as the research of – by definition – universal ontological features envisages here, on the contrary, indefinitely different outcomes according to the indefinitely different structures of forces which constitute any single context, community, tradition. All this implies that only a real immersion into the contingent structures of forces characterizing a specific community would own the instruments to assess the specific suitability of a philosophical position, and this claim would find Rorty’s agreement. But such a hypothetical immersion – and this is the essential contrast with the neo-pragmatist’s criticism toward Quine – would need to be not only compatible but coincident with an analysis of the essential structures of a context. The impossibility of fruitfully relying on Quine’s ideas of language and experience, from this point of view, is not provoked by this latter’s fallacious attempt to “limn the ultimate structure of reality” in his updated essentialism, as Rorty seems to claim. It is, on the contrary, brought by the fact that a fair evaluation of the pragmatic validity of thoughts such as Quine’s is doomed to be precluded by our essential impossibility of recreating “Quine’s community” and, therefore, by our inability to achieve a very essential analysis of its own structures of forces.

Are we, in this case, facing an inescapable *impasse* in our pragmatic assessment of Quine's scientific purposes? And does such a inescapability have an essential meaning in respect to a comparison of the suitability of two positions like, on the one hand, one which relies on the research of a common, clearer understanding of community languages and experiences – in order to create a “preferable situation” – and, on the other hand, one which relies on the hope to approach a similar agreement – on some “good looking vocabularies” – but is suspicious of any systematic and structural method to realise it?

To clarify this question, let us transpose it into the concrete implications it has upon our way of considering Quine's method. In effect, we have determined Quine's particular “model of rationality” as the one whereby the greatest hope to set up an agreeable vision of reality is to be fulfilled through a maximization of clarity and “objectivity” of our respective perceptions and “ontological commitments” and whereby an assessment of decisions about human conduct or explicitly aesthetic and ethical values is perceived as too unclear and, therefore, an onerous, delicate task for a philosophical investigation. We also concluded – as a “pragmatic” reading of Quine's predilection of “scientific” research in order to fulfil the general purpose of constructing a more suitable vision of reality – that his alternative is the survey of the most shared, linear and clearest “structures of forces” underlying a context, so to make misunderstandings less frequent and human cooperation more efficient.

From this point, our remark about the impossibility of evaluating the suitability of such a model from another model arose. We can then explicate such a remark by saying that a general pragmatic evaluation of Quine's method cannot be indifferent to a possible variation of Quine's “original” model of rationality. It cannot be indifferent, namely, to the always present possibility that a decision about human conduct can be completely “out of touch” with the consideration of what, according to a “Quinean” thinker, would be «the most shared,

linear and clearest “structures of forces” underlying a context». This possibility would destabilize in any case – even if one does not admit that the pragmatic intention we have hypothesized, “making misunderstandings less frequent and human cooperation more efficient”, is the real Quine’s aim – the linearity and simplicity of the historical development of a community, like Quine’s, in which the purpose of scientific agreement and of ontological commitments clarification is seen as the greatest human purpose. Because the role of such a “scientific agreement” would be seen as not essential for the determination of any criterion of decision and, therefore, of any holistic human environment.

Let us examine this possibility with an example. The “ambiguity of scope” of the sentence “I believe he saw a letter of mine” is taken by Quine, in *Word and Object*, as expressing one of the typical “vagaries of reference” which characterize our ordinary language. In fact, «we are accustomed daily to paraphrase our sentences under the stress or threat of failure of communication, and we can continue thus. Typical ways of doing just that are indeed all that this chapter will venture in a normative vein. The purpose of [this] study is to bring the referential business of our language more clearly into view»²⁶. One of the ways we can reformulate such a sentence, in order to “make more constant structures of forces stand out within our community” is by saying “I believe that some letter of mine is such that he saw it” if «the scope of the indefinite singular term “a letter of mine” is taken to be just “he saw a letter of mine”» and, therefore, «the whole sentence amounts to saying merely that I believe he did not miss all my letters». The sentences can be paraphrased, on the other hand, by saying “Some letter of mine is such that I believe that he saw it” if «the scope of “a letter of mine” is taken to be the whole sentence including “I believe”» and, then, «the whole sentence amounts rather to

²⁶ Quine (1960), p. 124.

saying that there are one or more letters of mine which, specifically, I believe he saw»²⁷.

In order to definitely establish whether a pragmatic evaluation of “attempts to improve intersubjective agreement through clarification” like this would be essentially compromised by the possibility of a shift in model of rationality, one cannot just recall the trivial cases in which an individual intentionally chooses to take advantage of a situation, to the detriment of the other individuals, despite a clear understanding of the “common structures of forces” acting within a community. These cases, in fact, can be charged as being “accidental”. One has to take into account whether and how the whole context coinciding with the utterance of ‘I believe that some letter of mine is such that he saw it’ or of ‘Some letter of mine is such that I believe that he saw it’ can produce a possibility of misunderstanding which is equivalent to that of the original sentence. One has to analyse, namely, whether there is an essential structure whereby the vagueness of intention or reference, due to the «indeterminacy of translation», cannot be effectively improved.

If our *impasse*, in effect, reveals to be definable through general issues such as “inevitability of indeterminacy of translation” or “notion of agreement as intrinsically problematic” it would not define a problem of pragmatic evaluation of Quine’s community made by other communities, but also a problem within “Quine’s community” itself.

What does the utterance of ‘I believe he saw a letter of mine’ own, in its structure, to make the agreement supposed by the “common understanding” of its expression difficult to achieve? In effect, a misunderstanding as strong as the one presumed by Quine is hardly likely to occur, if we consider that in the total context where the utterance of such sentence is inscribed one can find, “generally” in an easy way, the elements – in the situation, in the previous part of the conversation, in the issue of the debate – needed to discern the exact scope of the sentence.

²⁷ Ivi, pp. 138-139.

Quine's worries seem to be hyperbolic, because they are aimed at improving a typology of utterance which, even though not "generally", has in its own structure the potentiality for a failure of communication.

The possibility of a failure, within a holistic environment, can be active if the two interlocutors do not share the same combination of forces – in which case we would have to recall a new formulation of the «identity of indiscernibles» principle. From a holistic point of view, consciousness of a meaning is not a representation of something "distinct" but a «field of forces» which is in relation with other forces and is ceaselessly transformed by their actions. To communicate something, to "share knowledge", therefore, does not mean to "instil" a content of sense into an individual but, rather, to alter the reciprocal positions, the reciprocal roles among individuals forming a community. Jacques Derrida went through a deep study of the implications of such a reading of communication as, basically, an alterations of contexts.

What Derrida tries to show – using the terminology we have used so far – is that the "meaning" carried by an act of communication, the performance of a field of forces entirely depends on the overall context in which these are inscribed and, since the performance of such a context is definitely contingent – that is to say devoid of any intrinsic rule or dialectical mechanism – the reciprocal behaviour of two "subjects" reflects, in any case, the contingency of their position. This means that the "transmission" of the meaning of "I believe he saw a letter of mine" works as long as the modality of context transformation it creates is untied from what such a sentence "means" for the uttering subject: one cannot draw a rule from that but only from the total contingent environment of the interlocutor in order to predict the reaction of this latter. Derrida, in this regard, talks about the dissemination of the meaning carried by an expression. A linguistic expression can work within an intersubjective environment as long as the identity of its meaning has always been lost. The retention of the «fullness

of meaning» which is generally supposed from the possibility of re-activation of the expression is, on the contrary, a contingent occurrence equivalent to the random alterations of meaning which occur when any «code» re-iterates itself within a community: «Fullness therefore is only contingent. The absence of the object aimed at does not compromise the meaning, does not reduce the expression to its unanimated, and in itself meaningless, physical side [...] The “fulfilling” intuition therefore is not essential to expression, to what is aimed at by the meaning»²⁸.

The form of a code cannot limit the contingency of its total context in its indefinite explosion into singular holistic fields of forces and, therefore, into different reciprocal roles between subjects. D. Golumbia observes how Derrida’s conclusions about the structure of meaning can be interpreted as «an extreme restatement of Quine’s Indeterminacy of Translation thesis»: «(I) every meaningful mark-type is iterable. So: (II) every token of a meaningful mark-type is characterized by a dissemination which is both: (II-a) irreducible to univocality, and (II-b) irreducible to regulated polysemia. So (III) There can be no successful speech act, no successful linguistic communication»²⁹.

The extreme statement whereby «no successful communication is possible» is a consequence of the fact that a sharing of a “content of sense” is not a “sharing” at all but a modification of the pragmatic interaction between different fields of forces, whose discrepant configurations do not grant reasons to believe in a coincidence between such a “sharing” and a “common agreement on the suitable reciprocal roles to perform among subjects”. “Agreement” itself, from this perspective, is something which has nothing to do with a “sharing of knowledge”, because such a sharing is – rigorously speaking – structurally impossible as much as an “improvement” of it. What is commonly considered as “agreement” is one of the situations in which the contingent

²⁸ Derrida (1967^b), pp. 90-91.

²⁹ Golumbia (1999), p. 172.

roles coinciding with the contingent reciprocal positions of the different co-interacting fields of forces – what subjects are – are perceived as reciprocally suitable.

The notions of «integrity» or «conservation» of a certain content of sense is structurally inconceivable within a scenario which only involves reciprocal positions of forces-roles – which are likely to modify their total performance in consequence of any new contingent interaction, given their holistic structure³⁰. The comparison of two subjects “sharing” a very similar

³⁰ An interesting image given by Derrida about the intrinsic and original loss characterizing any “unity of sense” within a play of reciprocal, contingent roles can be found in his comment on Lacan’s interpretation of Poe’s *The Purloined Letter*. According to Lacan, the purloined letter carries a “sense” which is given to it by the indivisibility of its content and the original “contract” it represents. The conscious or unconscious retention of that sense would lead the roles of all characters to allow the letter to perform its authentic route until its coming back to its starting point (See Derrida 1980, pp. 453-454 and 469). Derrida challenges this psychoanalytic privilege of the “proper place” of truth, maintaining that Lacan overlooks the fact that the story told by the narrator is fiction inscribed within a context of other fictions and historical contexts of sense and, therefore, the behaviour of the characters does not respond to any rule but the one shaped by the contingency of the fiction of *The Purloined Letter*. Once put aside the abstractness of the schemes drawn by Lacan from within the tale, it becomes apparent that the sense of the letter has been disseminated – along with the random roles of the characters dealing with it – since its first repositioning, responding only to a random fictional “necessity”. The character of Dupin, the amateur detective who eventually manages to recover the letter, represents a role equivalent to the others, when because of an arbitrary development of the story he succeeds in accomplishing his goal. «The remaining structure of the letter is that [...] a letter can always not arrive at its destination. [...] And without this threat (breach of contract, division or multiplication, ...) the circuit of the letter would not even have begun. But with this threat, the circuit can always not finish» (Ivi, pp. 443-444). It may happen that, contingently, what we idealise as a “content of sense” (in this case, the contract represented by the letter) leads the involved roles to act in what we perceive as a behaviour which is “suitable”, but it would not depend on any rule carried by such a content of sense but, rather, on the random rules produced by the total environment of interaction among those roles. These random rules make the “sense of the letter” to be always lost, destroyed because of the arbitrariness of the characters’ roles.

knowledge and the comparison of two strangers, given these premises, is likely to produce an equivalent rate of “disagreement”. If the total context of the utterance “I believe he saw a letter of mine” can generate cases in which the awareness of the conversational background cannot avoid misunderstandings, the utterance of “Some letter of mine is such that I believe that he saw it” can open the context to a series of disagreements on what to do in consequences of the “shared” known fact, disagreements whose consequences can be “serious” and frequent in an equivalent way as in the case of the former misunderstanding.

In order to critically evaluate the potentialities of Quine’s intellectual proposal a neo-pragmatist approach to holism is inappropriate because its partial focus on selected features of holistic structures does not succeed in opposing a rigorous enough conception of this structure to the rigour through which Quine engages his study on the essential structures of a context. On the other hand, from a deconstructive perspective the question about what is “knowledge” and what is “clarity” or “linearity” can be inscribed within socio-pedagogical issues facing the fact that in contexts such as families and deep relationships reciprocal agreement does not depend on a shared “scientific” vision of the specific surrounding environment but, rather, on the typology and on the being “complementary” of reciprocal roles. Issues dealing with the fact that, throughout the last two centuries, national and international conflicts around the world have not been diminished in consequence of a hugely more univocal, precise and clear sharing of knowledge and linguistic communication. All this conveys the question whether the figure of the “stranger” can be determined by measuring linguistic, cultural and cognitive similarity with us or, instead, the suitability of her contingent role with ours, within a contingent situation³¹.

³¹ It is worth noting that the objection according to which there is an inevitable degree of – linguistic, cultural – misunderstanding at the beginning of any relationship between two strangers which is not existent within a local

A “scientific” research on the basic shared structure of knowledge necessarily needs to include an analysis of these ethical and sociological themes, otherwise the cultural result of an “improvement of the form of the scientific expression” will be nothing but the misleading appearance of reducing the contingency of a total environment.

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community – and this would indicate the necessity of a “dominant” commitment to “creating univocal forms of knowledge and language” in order to start off any policy of “common agreement” – does not take into account that the need, desire or necessity to meet a “stranger” community is coincident, in any case, with a need, desire or necessity which has not been fulfilled by an original, local community. The question is, therefore, to reflect about who was the “first” stranger and the theoretical consequences of that.

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Abstract

A criticism of Quine's methodology, from a neo-pragmatist's point of view, cannot rely on the objection whereby for a historicist and holistic conception of scientific language the regulatory concept of "proximity to real data" is senseless – as Rorty believes. This latter concept would be "pragmatically" justified, in fact, as a satisfactory emerging of constant typologies of structures and relations of forces which would coincide with a "useful" agreement within Quine's community. To show why this latter occurrence of "agreement" is problematic, therefore, we need to integrate Rorty's holism with Derrida's notions of dissemination and singularity of the event. Derrida's reflection might suggest that Quine's scientific criteria of clarity, simplicity, linearity, agreement and – consequently – the very concept of "science", can in no way be ontologically discerned from the necessity of an ethical assessment of the event.

Keywords: Quine, Derrida, Rorty, Agreement, Neo-pragmatism