AperTO - Archivio Istituzionale Open Access dell'Università di Torino

On my accent – Signs of belonging in present-day multicultural societies

This is the author's manuscript

Original Citation:

Availability:

This version is available http://hdl.handle.net/2318/76929 since

Terms of use:

Open Access

Anyone can freely access the full text of works made available as "Open Access". Works made available under a Creative Commons license can be used according to the terms and conditions of said license. Use of all other works requires consent of the right holder (author or publisher) if not exempted from copyright protection by the applicable law.

(Article begins on next page)

18 April 2024

On my Accent
Signs of Belonging in Multicultural Societies[*]

MASSIMO LEONE[**]

Titolo italiano: A proposito del mio accento – Segni di appartenenza nelle società multiculturali.

Abstract: The article takes as a point of departure the anecdotic experience of conversation with an Australian winemaker in the Yarra Valley in order to propose a detailed semio–linguistic analysis of the question "where is your accent from?". The pragmatic implicatures of this question are made explicit in the framework of intercultural pragmatics, conversation analysis, situation semantics, and interaction studies. The social implications of such question are pinpointed through a philosophical excursus on small talk — interpreted in analogy with the concept of sacrifice in René Girard's mimetic theory — and territoriality studies — with particular reference to Goffman and the topic of silence. The analysis continues through some thought experiments designing alternative conversational scenarios and ends with a comparison between the multicultural question "where is your accent from?" and the non–multicultural question "where are you from?" Through such comparative analysis, the article demonstrates that exclusionary logics are not absent in multicultural societies, but disguised in social rhetorics that are even more difficult to decode than those characterizing non–multicultural societies.

Key–words: accent; small talk; belonging; multiculturalism; discrimination.

1. Visiting an Australian winery

In 2009, I was fortunate enough to be granted an Endeavour Research Award by the Australian Government. I took a sabbatical leave from the University of Torino and moved with my wife to East Melbourne. I was perhaps supposed to study in libraries and conduct field research full time, but my friendly colleagues at Monash University provided me with irresistible occasions for distraction. After all, I considered it as necessary to know Australia not only through books, but also through social experience.

---

[*] The present article was written also thanks to the support of an Endeavour Research Award of the Australian Government. I discussed some of the contents of the article with colleagues at the School of English, Communication, and Performance Studies of Monash University. In particular, I acknowledge the insights of Elizabeth Coleman, Eduardo de La Fuente, and Andy Ruddock. Many thanks to Elizabeth Coleman for taking me to the Lirralirra winery in the Yarra Valley.

[**] University of Torino.

One of my 'research trips' included a visit to a beautiful winery in the countryside of Melbourne. The friendly owner, a man in his early sixties, welcomed us to his property, introduced us to his production of Semillon and Cabernet, and talked about the crisis of viniculture in Australia. I had a taste of two or three varieties of white, asked many questions, and spent words of appreciation for the beauty of the winery. At the end of the visit, after I had already bought a case of Semillon, the owner of the winery asked me: "Where is your accent from?" Indeed, I have an accent when I speak English, and not only after drinking several glasses of wine, but also when I am perfectly sober. "Italy", I answered, and the conversation immediately focused on Brunello di Montalcino and other expensive treasures of Italian winemaking. We soon had to say goodbye to him and head toward our next destination, a swimming area in the Yarra.

And yet, while my feet were refreshing in the cold waters of the river, and the taste of Semillon still persisted in my mouth, I kept repeating that question in my mind: "where is your accent from?" In all my journeys outside of Italy I had never been asked such a question before. I have an accent in every foreign language I speak, but after talking to me people usually asked "where are you from?". Only in Australia, for the first time, I had been asked where my accent was from.

Being a professional semiotician, I spontaneously began analyzing this question. What does it mean "where is your accent from?", what does it mean to me, and to the winemaker, and in comparison to the more frequent question "where are you from?".

2. The purposes of a question

First of all, "where is your accent from?" is clearly a question, as its syntax and prosody indicate. The commonsensical purpose of a question is to turn asymmetry into symmetry:[1] the winemaker does not know something, and he believes I know what he does not know. He also believes that my answer, if appropriate, will turn the asymmetry of information between us into symmetry: after my answer, we will both know.

This is what a question is when I, for instance, ask a passerby "what time is it?": she knows the time, I do not. If she answers the question, we will both know. However, the difference between "what time is it?" and "where is your accent from?" is that in the latter I am both the object of the question and the subject of the possible answer. In this case too the one who asks the question, the winemaker, does not know something and implicitly hopes that my answer will eliminate this ignorance. And yet, the something about which he does not know is not a neutral object between us, like time, for instance. The something about which the winemaker does not know is me.[2]

---

[1] Literature on interrogatives is extensive. In structural linguistics, semiotics, and conversation analysis, a common point of departure is Benveniste's famous characterization of the question as "one of the three main human behaviors": "La phrase appartient bien au discours. C'est même par là qu'on peut la définir : la phrase est l'unité du discours. Nous en trouvons confirmation dans les modalités dont la phrase est susceptible : on reconnaît partout qu'il y a des propositions assertives, des propositions interrogatives, des propositions impératives, distinguées par des traits spécifiques de syntaxe et de grammaire, tout en reposant identiquement sur la prédication. Or ces trois modalités ne font que refléter les trois comportements fondamentaux de l'homme parlant et agissant par le discours sur son interlocuteur: il veut lui transmettre un élément de connaissance, ou obtenir de lui une information, ou lui intimer un ordre. Ce sont les trois fonctions interhumaines du discours qui s'impriment dans les trois modalités de l'unité de phrase, chacune correspondant à une attitude du locuteur" (Benveniste 1962). For an early semiotic study of interrogatives, cfr Holk 1975; for a development of Benveniste's point of view, cfr Kerbrat–Orecchioni 1991; for a comparative study of the syntax and pragmatics of questions, cfr Gobber 1992 (with examples from Italian, German, Polish, and Russian), Comorovski 1996 (which focuses predominantly on Romanian and English) and Hentschel 1998 (with emphasis on German, Serbian, and Turkish and the sketch of a comparison involving 52 languages); for a survey on the syntax and pragmatics of interrogatives in English, mainly from the point of view of situation semantics, Ginzburg 2001; for a survey of the literature on the linguistics and conversation analysis of questions until 2006, cfr Rost–Roth 2006, esp. Ch. 2 (pp. 10–137). On the logic/epistemology of questions, Valentin 1985 and Somerville 2002.

[2] The semio–linguistics of enunciation first developed by Benveniste and currently among the 'trendiest' research areas in structural semiotics could give precious insights into the pragmatic difference between a 'dialogical' question, where the topic of the question explicitly concerns its addressee — and implicitly invites her to talk about herself in relation to such topic — and a 'non–dialogical' question, where the topic of the question does not explicitly concern its addressee — and implicitly invites her to talk about something else than

In other words, if upon being asked “what time is it?”, I am implicitly told that the current time is a mystery to my interlocutor, then upon being asked “where is your accent from?” I am implicitly told that *I* am a mystery for my interlocutor: the winemaker does not know where my accent is from, and wishes to eliminate this ignorance.

As we know from speech acts theory, however, questions can be asked for different purposes than discovering something from the interlocutor.[3] To start with, questions always implicitly convey an affirmation as well. The question “what time is it?”, for instance, implicitly conveys the affirmation “I do not know what time it is”, as well as the affirmation “I believe you know what time it is, or are able to find out, and are able to understand my question and willing to answer in such way that I too can know what time it is”.

What are the implicit affirmations conveyed by the question “where is your accent from?” The first is “I do not know where your accent is from”. The second: “your accent is not from here”. The third: “I believe you know where your accent is from, and are able to understand my question and willing to answer in such way that I too can know where your accent is from”.

The affirmations implicitly contained in questions are also instructions for the interlocutor.[4] When I ask: “what time is it?”, I do not only affirm my ignorance, but I also expect my interlocutor to answer in a

---

herself in relation to such topic. Bibliography on Benveniste and enunciation is extensive. For a study on the phenomenological roots of the semio–linguistics of enunciation, cfr Parret 1987; for a ground–breaking contribution on enunciation as a topic for semiotic inquiry, Courtés 1998; for an application of the semiotic paradigm of enunciation studies to interrogatives, cfr Guillaume 2006; for a trend in present–day semiotic research that develops Benveniste’s idea of a “semio–linguistics of the subject”, cfr Coquet 2007, as well as the other works of this semiotician, including the Festschrift for Coquet edited by Constantini and Darrault–Harris in 1996; for a study on the concept of enunciation in Benveniste, cfr Ono 2007; for a recent survey, cfr Manetti 2008.

[3] Literature on questions analyzed in the theoretical framework of speech acts theory is very vast. Besides the contributions of the founders of this branch of pragmatic inquiry (Austin, Searle), cfr Goody 1978, Geis 1995; for a development of Austin’s quadripartite typology of questioning speech–acts cfr Fiengo 2007

[4] Needless to say, the pragmatics of H. Paul Grice offers an excellent conceptual grid to analyze the way in which questions more or less implicitly provide instructions for their answers; for a concise introduction, Eckard 1994 and Cosenza 2001 and 2002. From a more sociological point of view, Goffman’s idea of face is of course central in understanding the pragmatics of dialogical questions. Cfr Reiger 1992 and Straniero 2004.

way that will satisfy my question. For instance, I expect my interlocutor to answer by telling me what time it is in the time zone where we both happen to be. I would be very frustrated indeed if we were both on Flinders Lane in Melbourne and she answered me: “it is 7:00 AM in Rome”. Hence, implicit affirmations in this question are also instructions on what kind of affirmation is expected as an appropriate answer. In other words, they limit the range of possible answers to the question itself. This is why there is always something normative about questions. When I am asked something, I am also given instructions about what might be an appropriate answer to this same question.

Thus, what are the instructions communicated by the question “where is your accent from?” and by the affirmations implicitly contained in it? First instruction: the question points out that according to the winemaker my accent and his cannot possibly be from the same place. My accent must be from a different place than his, and vice versa. Second instruction: my accent must be from an elsewhere in relation to the place where the conversation is taking place, whereas his accent is exactly from the place where the conversation is taking place.[5]

In order to understand how these instructions work, let us imagine what my answer might be if I decided not to follow them. For instance, if I decided to contravene the first instruction by answering: “my accent is from where your accent is”. Or, if I contravened the second instruction too by replying: “my accent is from Melbourne, Australia”.

To most people, both the first and the second answer would be considered not only as inappropriate — since they would not satisfy the expectations of the winemaker — but also as impolite.[6] But why would these answers be considered as such?

---

[5] In other words, instructive and (therefore) normative implicatures contained in this dialogical question must be analyzed with reference to the spatial conceptual grid articulated by the question itself as an act of enunciation, and to the relation between such grid and the linguistic simulacra of both the questioner and the questioned.

[6] Literature on the pragmatics of impoliteness is expanding. For a study based on Grice’s pragmatics and Goffman’s concept of “face”, cfr Bousfield 2008 and Bousfield and Locher 2008. Nevertheless, thus far most pragmatic research has rather focused on politeness. For one of the most recent collection of essays by leading specialists, cfr Lakoff and Ide 2005, as well as Watts, Ide, and Ehlich 2005; for a theoretical essay on the role of implicatures in

Let me be clear: I was not impolite to the winemaker. I joyfully answered: “Italy”. However, I could not stop thinking about what the winemaker’s reaction would have been, had I answered “Melbourne, Australia”. What would this possible reply communicate? First: “my accent and yours are from the same place”, and second: “my accent is from Australia as much as yours is”. In other words, the answer I did not give would have sounded impolite because it would have sounded like a claim: my accent is from here as much as yours is.

But what is impolite in a claim? A claim is impolite because its meaning more or less always depends on its relation with a counterclaim. A claim is impolite because it brings about a potential conflict: it represents a certain reality in a way X, which is (at least, at first sight) incompatible with the way the same reality is represented in a way Y.[7]

Hence, had I answered “my accent is from Melbourne, Australia”, my answer would not only contain the claims “my accent is from here as much as yours is” and “my accent is Australian as much as yours is”, but it would also contain the claim: “your counterclaim, implicitly contained in your question, is impolite: it is wrong to believe that my accent must come from an elsewhere that is not here, that is not Australia”. Therefore, the answer would have been impolite not only because it would have sounded like a claim, but also because it would have revealed the impoliteness of its counterclaim.

But which is the right claim, and which impoliteness must be condemned? Is the impoliteness of the answer or that of the question revealed by the answer? In my case, I did not feel that the winemaker was asking an impolite question. I felt that he was right in believing that my accent was not from Australia, that his accent was more from Australia than mine, and I took his question as an act of genuine and

---

politeness, cfr Kallia 2007; for a survey of the bibliography on this topic and a semiotic comparison between Italian and Iranian politeness forms, cfr Leone 2009; for a comparative pragmatics of politeness involving participant observation in English, French, German, and Swedish environments, cfr Clyne, Norrby, Warren 2009.

[7] On the language of claims in relation to conflicts of cultural identity, cfr Nunan and Choi 2010, in particular Marc Cherry’s paper “Nonghao, I am a Shanhai Noenoe: how do I claim my Shanghaineseness?”. For a specific study on the complex ways in which Hebrew is claimed as a language, cfr Feuer 2008.

innocent curiosity. Furthermore, his fondness for Barolo was hardly compatible with any anti–Italian sentiments.

After all, I had been in Melbourne only three months. I still looked on the left upon crossing roads: it was too soon to claim that my accent was from Australia. But let us consider the following thought experiment: my love for Melbourne's weather is so profound that I decide to settle in a cool apartment in Fitzroy. I give up my job in Torino and live for thirty years in Melbourne. I say "mate" more and more often but from a strictly phonological point of view my accent changes little.[8] After thirty years, I visit the same winery. The winemaker is in his early nineties but, thanks to the nutritional properties of red wine, is in perfect mental and physical shape. I have a brief conversation with him, buy a case of Semillon vintage year 2039, and then the winemaker asks me: "where is your accent from?" What should I answer? Is my accent still from Italy? Does it sound less impolite to answer "Melbourne, Australia"? Does the winemaker's question sounds more impolite? And why?

In the thought experiment, the winemaker's perception of my accent is exactly as it is in the real experience.[9] Maybe his hearing is poorer because of age, but the implications of his question are exactly the same: my accent comes from a different place than his, and this place is not Australia. On the contrary, in the thought experiment my perception of this question, and of the claims it entails, has changed. I have been living in Melbourne for thirty years, and learnt that thousands of people in this city have a similar accent to mine, and many more people have an accent that is neither similar to mine nor to that of the winemaker.[10] I have actually learnt that most of the people I know in Melbourne do not have his accent. Would I still consider his question as an expression of genuine and innocent curiosity? Would I still consider as impolite to answer: "my accent comes from Melbourne, Australia, and yours? Where does your accent come from?"

---

[8] In this paper, "accent" designates a manner of pronunciation of a language. Individual accents change constantly; cfr the famous study by Jonathan Harrington (2006), which through acoustic analysis of Queen Elizabeth II's Royal Christmas Messages demonstrated how even in the case of such an institutional and conservative figure pronunciation patterns of English vary over time. One could even argue that one's accent is like one's skin, imperceptibly but constantly changing because of biological (internal, such as aging) and social (external, such as contact) factors. This said, the acquisition of a certain accent of a language by non–native speakers varies considerably depending on neurological plasticity, cognitive development, formal instruction, language learning attitude, and the usage of the first (L1) and the second (L2) languages (Munro and Mann 2005). For both biological and psycho–social reasons (whose exact combination is still matter of debate among scholars) changing one's accent in adult age is empyrically proved as possible, but rarely as a seemingly spontaneous, apparently effortless phenomenon. This explains the proliferation of 'accent reduction' theories and courses. For a general theory of accent, cfr Haraguchi 1991. For a monumental study on English accents, cfr Wells 1982, as well as the other works by this British phoneticist. For an empirical analysis of the English accent of Russian migrants, cfr Thompson 1991. For a survey of the new sociolinguistic trend called "sociophonetics", cfr Preston and Niedzielski 2010.

[9] Indeed, the way in which native speakers of Italian who are not native speakers of English (including me) commonly pronounce this second language can be objectively described: tendency to replace the English high lax vowels: tendency to replace the English high lax vowels, etc.

3. On being from somewhere

The theoretical question to answer here is: what do we mean when we say that an accent is from somewhere?

The question "where is your accent from?" contains an implicit claim also because it contains an implicit narrative.[11] What does this narrative say about the accent? What story does it narrate? First, the narrative distinguishes between two times. A time T1, in which the accent was in an elsewhere, and a time T2, in which the accent is here. Only on the basis of this implicit spatio–temporal structure can we ask: "where is your accent from?" At the same time, this question contains an implicit narrative also as regards the accent of the one who asks the question. Yet, the story of this narrative is different: the accent of the one who asks the question was here at T1 as well as T2, but while in T1 no other accents were present in this 'here', in T2 other accents came to this ‘here’ from an elsewhere in which they were at T1.[12]

---

[10] According to the last Australian census (2006), 34.8% of the population of Melbourne was born overseas. This percentage is currently growing. Italian–born residents in Melbourne are 2.4% of the overall population, that is, 73,801 individuals (the second largest overseas–born ethno–linguistic group after that of UK–born citizens); cfr Australian Bureau of Statistics (2006).

[11] On the narrative construction of identity, cfr Violi 2001 and Henning 2009; on narratives of linguistic displacement, cfr Collins, Slembrouck, and Banyam 2009; for a recent critique of the role of coherence in interpreting identity narratives, cfr Hyvärinen *et al.* 2010; on the 'sociolinguistics of globalization', Blommaert 2010.

From this point of view, the implicit statement “my accent is from here” means that my accent was present in this place before yours, and your accent is not from here because it came after.

However, the meaning of the statement “my accent is from here” cannot depend exclusively on a matter of time. Let us consider a second *Gedankenexperiment*. I am a British professor with a thick Scottish accent. I visit the same winery. I cannot talk about the wines of my country but I have accumulated a lot of experience in Tuscany and I share it with the winemaker. At the end of the conversation he asks me: “where is your accent from?”

In this case, the temporal argument does not work anymore: I could claim that my British accent was here before the accent of my interlocutor, that it was here actually at the beginning of Anglophone Australia (although it would be hard to prove that the accent of the first Anglophone settlers in Australia was more similar to my British accent than to the accent of the winemaker). Still, the winemaker feels ‘entitled’ to ask “where is your accent from?” and I feel ‘obliged’ to answer “from the UK”.

Perhaps the implicit narrative of the question “where is your accent from?” is not about time but about numbers. It does not matter if the British accent was here before that of the winemaker. The winemaker’s accent is nonetheless more ‘from here’ than mine because the number of people who have the same accent as his is far larger than the number of people who have the same accent as mine.

However, this argument too deserves further investigation. In relation to what ‘here’ are these numbers calculated? For instance, the winery is surrounded by other wineries whose owners bear names like Zamboni, Gemma, Spoti, etc., and whose accent is very similar to mine. Is the winemaker’s accent still from here more than from an elsewhere? What about Carlton? What about Richmond? What about Coburn? And Dandenong? Local statistics would probably reveal that the predominant accent is not that of the winemaker. What about Australia considered as a whole? Will the accent of the winemaker still be considered as ‘from here’ more than any other, if other accents were more present on the overall Australian territory than his?

---

[12] For an excellent collection of essays on the construction of ‘chronotopes’, cfr Bender and Wellbery 1991; for an interdisciplinary approach to history, identity, and narrative temporality, LaCapra 2004.

The temporal and the statistic arguments are both necessary to define the ‘autochthony’ of an accent,[13] but they are not sufficient. Why should an accent be conceived as ‘from here’ more than other accents if other accents were here before and if other accents are more widespread? What ultimately grounds the self–perception of autochthony of an accent?

A third argument could claim that while my accent is more frequent elsewhere than here, the accent of the winemaker is more frequent here than elsewhere. We could name this argument as ‘the exclusivity argument’. The accent of the winemaker is from Australia more than mine because it can be found only in Australia (with the exception of some million Australian expatriates, of course), while my accent is less from here than the winemaker’s because it can be found in abundance in a small country in the middle of the Mediterranean.

But is it really so? Paradoxically, the accent I have when I speak with the winemaker does not exist in Italy, for the simple reasons that one cannot speak Italian with an Italian accent. Italian speakers would probably say that my accent is from southern Italy, and Puglia speakers would probably say that my accent is from Lecce, and speakers from Lecce would probably say that my accent is from the city rather than from the countryside. But no Italian would say that I have an Italian accent when I speak Italian. ‘Italian–ness’ can be a qualification of my accent only when I do not speak Italian. Therefore, saying that my accent is not from Australia because it is predominantly present elsewhere does not make any sense: perhaps, nowhere my accent is present more than in Melbourne.

The temporal, statistic, and exclusivity arguments all fail in explaining what we mean when we say that an accent is or is not from somewhere.

---

[13] On the concept of “autochthony” in globalized or globalizing societies, cfr Geschiere 2009.

They all fail because they all imply that the fact that an accent is or is not from a certain place depends on the relation between the accent and the place. This is not true. It is not true because an accent is not an essential but a relational feature. An accent can be perceived only as a difference between the ways in which two or more interlocutors speak. We perceive the accent of other people because they are different from ours, and we perceive our accent because it is different from that of other people, but we are unable to perceive our own accent on its own, as an essence. Therefore, when we say that someone "has an accent", we should actually say that someone has an accent that is different from ours.

Does this mean that when I spoke with the winemaker, we both had an accent? We certainly had. I had an accent for the winemaker, and the winemaker had an accent for me. Thus the following question: why did the winemaker ask me where my accent was from, and not vice versa? Why didn't I ask him where his accent was from first?

A tentative answer might start from the following consideration: in the encounter between the winemaker and I, it is not only the relation between a place (the winery? the Yarra valley? Melbourne area? Victoria? Australia?) and the difference between two accents (my accent, the winemaker's) that is at stake, but also the relation between all these elements and something that could be called "the ideal accent".[14]

The concept of "ideal accent" is necessary in order to explain the non–essential, relational nature of accents. It would be too simplistic to say that in the encounter between the winemaker and I, we both perceived our accents as different from the accent of the other. This would not be true. Or rather, it would be partially true.

Let us consider the following (third) thought experiment: I am still wandering about the wineries of the Yarra valley. After saying goodbye to my Australian Semillon expert, I end up in a winery that is owned by Marcello Pacifico, a Sicilian man who moved to Australia in the late 1960s. He realizes that I am Italian, offers me a glass of Nero d'Avola, and starts speaking to me in Italian. I immediately realize that he has a strong regional accent from Sicily. Being an amateurish dialectologist, I can even guess that his accent is typical of Palermo. This time it is me who ask him: “where are you from?”. In Italy, people do not ask “where is your accent from?”, but more commonly “where are you from?”. I will expound on the difference between these two questions later.

---

[14] Incidentally, this is the name of many "accent reduction programs" around the world.

The point here is: given a conversation between two interlocutors, why does one of them perceive the accent of the other more, as it is the case in this thought experiment, or as it was the case in my real encounter with the winemaker in the Yarra Valley? And, even more importantly: why does the presence of this accent matters to one of the interlocutors more than to the other? Why does one of the interlocutors feel compelled, as well as entitled, to ask this question more than the other?[15]

There are many things we can say when we come across a stranger, yet we say certain things more than others. We say them in a certain way more than in another. Why, for instance, did where my accent was from matter to the winemaker? Why does it matter in the thought experiment above?

4. On small talk

Answering this question will require a reflection on the so–called “small talk”.[16] A reflection that will help us define the concept of “ideal accent”. Small talk is small only by name. In reality, it is one of the most important elements for understanding a certain culture. What is small talk? It is what we say to an interlocutor when we do not really have anything to say. And why do we say something to someone although we do not have anything to say?

---

[15] These questions are currently tackled mostly by that area of psycho– and socio–linguistics called “speech perception”. For an application of accent speech perception studies on the topic of linguistic discrimination in the real estate market, cfr Fisseha 2009; for some interesting remarks on accent perception and linguistic discrimination in the job market, cfr Collins 1996, p. 90: “Despite the fact that an immigrant with an accent might be a great communicator, great in teamwork, possess multilingual abilities and speak English well, an accent hints to many employers that there are potential costs, not potential benefits, in employing this person. Hence an accent or physical appearance may lead employers — or in large public and private corporations their gatekeepers, such as personnel officers — to reject these applicants on the ground that they might cost too much to train and/or might not be able to benefit from training”; for an introduction to linguistic discrimination, cfr Skuttnab–Kangas, Phillipson, and Rannut 1994.

[16] Bibliography on small talk is extensive, especially in the field of interactional sociolinguistics ; cfr Beinstein 1975, Schneider 1988, Coupland 2000 and 2003; for an intercultural perspective, cfr Rall 1996 and Lu 1997; for a cross–cultural perspective, Schneider 2008.

If we ask this question, it is because we hold a naïve conception of language, a conception in which language is used to externalize internal thoughts and communicate them to an interlocutor. In reality, this is only one of the functions of language. If this were its only function, then every time we had no internal thoughts to externalize or to communicate to an interlocutor, we would be perfectly silent. We know this is not empirically true. In many circumstances, we do not have any internal thoughts to externalize and communicate, and yet we speak with the interlocutor, at times even at length.

Does this mean we do not have any internal thoughts in small talk? That we do not have any thoughts to communicate? If this question is reformulated as follows: does this mean that in small talk no mental activity goes on in the minds of interlocutors? The answer is certainly: no, mental activity goes on in the minds of interlocutors also when they make small talk. After all, who asked me where my accent was from was not a machine, he was not a robot; I was encouraged, on the contrary, to characterize him as a charming winemaker with a mental activity in all similar to mine.

However, if the question above is reformulated as follows: does this mean that the thoughts we have in small talk are different from those we have when we really wish to say something, when we really have some particular internal thoughts that we wish to externalize and communicate? Then the answer must be: yes. My daily phone conversations with my distant parents, for instance, are mostly small talk. Normally, we first inquire about each other's health, then we inquire about each other's weather, and then we inquire about each other's food.

Neither my parents nor I have become robots without any human mental activity when we make this small talk, and yet the thoughts that we have when we make it are different from the thoughts we had in October 2005 when I phoned my parents in Italy from California to tell them that, at the relatively young age of thirty, I was going to get married with a young American girl. That was by no means small talk.

And why not? Because the mental activity that was going on in both my parents' mind and mine was very different from what goes on when we inquire about health, weather, and food. In the first case, I felt a keen desire to tell my parents about my nuptial plan, this desire gave rise to a communicative intention, and this intention to a short but intense cognitive period during which I mused on what the best way to tell them would be. This cognitive period involved a semi–conscious pre–choice of words, as well as a sort of silent, mental rehearsal. It also involved a conversation with my future wife in order to rehearse the talk that I would have with my parents thereafter.

In small talk, we do not have the same desire and intention to communicate and especially we do not go through a semi–conscious cognitive stage of preparation. But if the purpose of small talk is not that of externalizing and communicating internal thoughts, what is its purpose then? Why do we make small talk and, even more importantly, what is the socio–cultural meaning of it?

Roman Jakobson (and Bronislaw Malinowski before him) would have said that small talk has a mostly "phatic" purpose,[17] that is, it creates a channel of communication between two or more people.[18] However, this description would be too simplistic. Small talk certainly creates a channel of communication, but this does not explain why such channel should be occupied by small talk and not by more intentional talk or even by silence.

My claim is that the main function of small talk is one of social control. This does not mean that by telling my parents that I am in good health or the weather in Melbourne is good, this information allows them to exercise a certain control over me. What I mean is that when we make small talk, we implicitly manifest our willingness to play the socio–linguistic game of a certain community of speakers. We implicitly manifest our acceptance of the rules that govern this community. We implicitly reassure our interlocutors that our behavior in the community will not be aggressive: we will not break its rules. It is only on the basis of this implicit statement of adherence to a certain socio–linguistic community that small talk can subsequently become the neutral ground for more significant, intentional, and personal conversation.

---

[17] Cfr Malinowski 1972 (1923); Jakobson 1960 and 1973.

[18] Indeed, much current research on 'small talk' deals with it as an expression of the phatic function of language. Cfr Laver 1975, Ameka 1992, and Abercrombie 1998.

There is no better way to prove the function of “social control”, in the sense explained above, of small talk, than considering the cases in which small talk fails (Jaworski 2000). I meet a couple of colleagues in the Staff Club of Monash University. They begin talking about how changing the weather is in Melbourne, a common way to start conversations at Monash as well as in many other socio–linguistic contexts (Coupland and Ylänne–McEwen 2000). Before I comment on how impressed I am by the variability of the weather in the area, I start saying that we should organize a symposium on social aesthetics in Italy. My colleagues are polite enough to continue the conversation that I have started, but we all realize that something in the conversation has gone wrong. I did not play the rules of the conversation well. I too should have said something about the weather, or about how nice the Staff Club was, before exteriorizing a more personal thought, before giving rise to a more intentional communication (Drew and Heritage 1998).

My failing to respect the rules of the socio–linguistic game manifests a certain aggressiveness that can either frighten my interlocutors or push them to an equally aggressive conversational behavior, or simply make them feel that talking to me is not very pleasant. My colleagues might not articulate these unpleasant feelings (fear, aggressiveness, repulsion) as I have done, but they would nonetheless feel them. They would feel that my presence somehow ‘spoils the game’.

But why should the rejection of small talk ‘spoil the game’? In order to explain why, I claim that conversation is not only a game. It is also an aggressive game. And not only when sensitive issues, such as politics and religion, are at stake. On the contrary, the example above shows that conversation is an aggressive game also when no particular issues are at stake.

René Girard’s theory of the mimetic desire might be useful to explain the intrinsic aggressiveness of conversation.[19] It is only in a naïve conception of language and communication that we can believe conversation to be a social situation in which everybody can freely exteriorize their internal thoughts as they wish. On the contrary, René Girard's theoretical framework seems much more appropriate to explain what happens in even the more banal everyday conversations: as soon as two interlocutors meet, and one of them starts to talk to the other, the other is seized by a mimetic desire to have what the other interlocutor is having at the moment, that is, in short, a channel (I speak, everybody else is silent) and attention (I speak, everybody else listens to me). Conversation analysis has produced many useful insights into the complex rules that govern the competition of mimetic desires that is intrinsic to every conversation.[20]

---

[19] Literature on this anthropological hypothesis is vast; for one of the last formulations of the mimetic principle by its author, Girard 2007; for an exploration of the theoretical implica-

However, such competition does not arise exclusively in emotionally loaded conversational contexts. On the contrary, the competition of mimetic desires of speaking, of seizing both the channel and the attention of conversation, is at the basis of even the most banal daily communicative exchanges.

René Girard's theory therefore helps us to understand what small talk really is: it is a sacrifice. It is the creation of a verbal, conversational scapegoat. It is a daily ritual through which all those who take part in a conversation implicitly say: "I am not going to aggress you; I am not exerting a violent behavior in order to seize the channel and the attention of the conversation; I will play the game by its rules".

In this sense small talk is "phatic". Not in the simply mechanic sense that Jakobson gave to this function of language after the model of information sciences, but in the sense that small talk enables individual speakers to implicitly manifest their abidance by the rules of a certain socio–linguistic community before they can express themselves personally. This is why egocentric personalities usually detest small talk. They would like to express themselves personally, they would like to externalize and communicate their internal thoughts, before acknowledging the rules of the socio–linguistic community in which these thoughts will be externalized.

---

tions, Palaver 2003, esp. ch. 3, "Das mimetische Begehren"; for a concise introduction, Fleming 2004 and Haeussler 2005.

[20] For a synthesis, cfr the 4 vols of Drew and Heritage 2006.

And this is why there is something robotic, automatic, and even alienating about small talk: when we make small talk, we do not express our individuality, if not merely through our individual decision to abide by the rules of a socio–linguistic community. In other words, it is not "we" who speak; it is the socio–linguistic community in which we would like to speak that *speaks through us* before we can *speak in it*.

But this is also why small talk is so fascinating for the social scientist. It is not the same everywhere in the world, and has not always been the same in every époque. Try to have small talk with the member of a socio–linguistic community you are not familiar with and you will realize that small talk too has culturally specific codes. Yet, it is exactly these culturally specific codes that matter for the social scientist. By decoding the small talk of a certain socio–linguistic community we can understand something about the rules that govern conversations in such community, but also something about the values that such community holds as fundamental.

Indeed, exactly because it is not us who speak in a socio–linguistic community, but the sociolinguistic community that speaks before us, and through us, we can use small talk as a social indicator. The daily small talk I make with my parents, for instance, is a ritual, a verbal sacrifice that we make before we say anything personal in order to reassure our small conversational community that nothing has changed, that things are exactly as they were the day before, that our roles in conversation have not mutated, and that what mattered yesterday still matters today and will probably matter tomorrow.

Yet, the fact that small talk is a 'zero degree of conversation' for us, a reassuring neutral background for those who are inside the conversational game, does not mean that this background is neutral for those outside of it. To an external listener — i.e. someone who is not part of the same micro–socio–linguistic community — such small talk might well sound strange, bizarre, and, above all, loaded with information about the specific nature of this community. The fact that my parents and I systematically enquire about our health, weather, and food is not neutral, but tells to the potential external listener something about the prominence of these three subjects in shaping what we consider the normality of our micro–socio–linguistic environment.

We never pay too much attention to what we say when we come across a stranger, especially when this happens in a social context we are quite familiar with. We never pay attention because what we say on these occasions is mostly a defense mechanism. Small talk is, in fact, more important when we come across strangers than when we meet our acquaintances, but not for the reason that is commonly given within a naïve conception of small talk: because we do not know what to say, or because we do not know what to ask.

If this was the reason, small talk should actually be more prominent when we come across our acquaintances than when we meet strangers. After all, saying things about us and asking things about our interlocutor should be more interesting when we do not know anything about her than when we know something, or when we think we know everything.

On the contrary, we make more small talk with strangers because the defensive function of small talk, the way in which it regulates potentially aggressive desires in conversations, is actually more urgent when we talk with our acquaintances.

This is why we do not pay attention to it: when we make small talk, we are doing something slightly more personal and intentional than when someone sits too close to us in a bus, and we move a little to avoid too much physical contact.[21] Through small talk, we make sure that our interlocutor is a well–behaved member of our same socio–linguistic community, as well as we make sure that our face–to–face relation with her is not characterized by silence (Kaworski 2000).

5. On silence in elevators

But why should silence, after all, embarrass us? Why is it less embarrassing to share silence with someone we are intimate with than with someone we do not know? Elevators are a very suitable environment to carry on an ethno–semiotic study of small talk and silence.

---

[21] From this point of view, small talk should be studied from the point of view of a theoretically enlarged proxemics, or, adopting the perspective of current biosemiotics, as a branch of territoriality studies ; cfr Tringham 1973 and Ericksen 1980.

Both the building of my University in Torino and that of Monash University in Melbourne have elevators. Elevators in Torino are too small and slow to be the object of any serious participant observation: there is hardly room for anyone else other than the ethnologist. Moreover, the analysis would be biased by the fact that people get so nervous waiting for the elevator that they become socially aggressive.

The elevators of Monash University, on the contrary, are perfect for a micro–participant observation about conversation and silence: they are reasonably wide, fast, and crowded. Many people at Monash University — as well as in other buildings around the world I suppose — use the conversational micro–space of elevators according to recurrent patterns.[22]

When people happen to be with strangers in the same elevator for a certain time, for instance the time to go from the ground to the seventh floor of the Menzies building at Monash University, many of them feel almost compelled to start a short small talk. It is as if sharing silence with strangers, even for such a short time, was unbearable to them. In general, the more the elevator is crowded, the less this urge for small talk manifests itself. This urge manifests itself when people are in company of strangers, but these strangers are not so many that they become an indistinct crowd; hence, when strangers are considered potential interlocutors, but also as potential aggressors. There is no precise threshold at which strangers are no longer potentially individual threats and merge into a neutral crowd, but certainly the relation between the number of people and the space available determines this transition[23].

---

[22] Most research on this topic is, of course, Goffman–inspired (1961, 1967, 1971). On recurrent patterns of social interactions in Japanese elevators, Caesar 2000. Cfr Paumgarten's witty description of these (also linguistic) patterns in US elevators: "Passengers seem to know instinctively how to arrange themselves in an elevator. Two strangers will gravitate to the back corners, a third will stand by the door, at an isosceles remove, until a fourth comes in, at which point passengers three and four will spread toward the front corners, making room, in the center, for a fifth, and so on, like the dots on a die. With each additional passenger, the bodies shift, slotting into the open spaces. The goal, of course, is to maintain (but not too conspicuously) maximum distance and to counteract unwanted intimacies […]. One should face front. Look up, down, or, if you must, straight ahead. Mirrors compound the unease. Generally, no one should speak a word to anyone else in an elevator. Most people make allowances for the continuation of generic small talk already under way, or, in residential buildings, for neighborly amenities. The orthodox enforcers of silence — the elevator Quakers — must suffer the moderates or the serial abusers, as they cram in exchanges about the night, the game, the weekend, or the meal" (Paumgarten 2008, on–line text).

More generally — although with variations that depend on 'local conversation cultures'[24] — nothing is more threatening than silence in interactions between two strangers or between two people whose reciprocal acquaintance is very limited. When we refuse small talk, or are unable to participate in it, we reveal the potential aggressiveness that is at the basis of every face–to–face conversation, and that the verbal sacrifice of small talk allows to regulate.

If I mentally enumerate people I would feel comfortable sharing silence with, for instance in a situation of bodily immobility such as sitting face–to–face in a pub or in a train, I must come to the conclusion that they are very few, and that when two people are able to 'stare into each other's eyes' and share silence they either love each other or hate each other. They either get on so well that they do not feel threatened in any way by each other, or they do not get on well at all and are ready to attack each other.

This is why we make small talk more with strangers than with people we know: the less we know people with whom we share silence, the more we feel the urge to be reassured about the fact that they will not attempt at our individuality, that they will not fill this silence, this empty space between us, in a way that will endanger our individual existential tranquility.[25]

Does this mean that when I make a lot of small talk with my parents on the phone, we are embarrassed by silence and afraid that might be filled aggressively? In a way it does. We make small talk because the telephone in a way transforms us into more strangers for each other than we actually are. When I meet my parents personally, for instance, the amount of small talk we make decreases dramatically because the medium of our conversation changes.

---

[23] A cornucopia of insights into these dynamics is, of course, Elias Canetti's *Masse und Macht*.

[24] Cfr Nakane 2007.

[25] Literature on silence is very vast ; for an interdisciplinary approach, Jaworski 1997; for a cultural history of silence in communication, cfr Ulsamer 2002; for a recent study on the rhetoric of silence, cfr Glenn 2004; for an introduction of the most common theoretical interpretations, cfr Farrell and Dos 2008.

People, who normally speak face–to–face, such as parents and their children, need to make a certain amount of small talk with each other when they switch from face–to–face to phone conversation not because they suddenly become strangers, but because in a phone conversation, their assurance about each other's ontology is challenged.[26] Let us think, for instance, how disquieting it is when someone is suddenly silent at the other end of the phone line. We cannot share silence on the phone, not even with a beloved person, in the same way in which we share silence in a face–to–face (tacit) conversation.

On the phone, the silence of the interlocutor is immediately taken either as a sign of death or of threat (how common this silence is in horror movies!), because the voice that should fill this silence is the only sign that reveals the ontological existence of our interlocutor. This is why we need to keep the conversation going when we talk to people on the phone, even if they are not strangers, even if we would be perfectly at ease sharing silence with them face–to–face, even if we would make no small talk with them if we could only see their faces. When there is silence on the phone we are like blind people who were talking with a friend in a room, and suddenly the room becomes silent, and a gelid aura of death fills the empty space.

This is the reason for which we do not mind what we say in small talk. It would be a little like minding squinting our eyes when the light is too strong. However, the social scientist who observes small talk conversations from an external point of view should pay attention to what is said in them, or rather, to what is said through them.

Why for instance, and we return to the main topic of this paper, did the winemaker's small talk with me include such a question as "where is your accent from?" The best way to tackle this issue is to imagine some alternative small talks and confront their semantic and pragmatic effect with the one that really took place.

6. Alternative small–talks

Scenario 1: I make small talk with the winemaker, and at some stage I ask him: "where is your accent from?"

---

[26] Cfr Ferraris 2005; for a socio–semiotic approach, cfr Marrone 2004.

I have already pointed out that such question would have sounded at least bizarre and, in the worst case, like an aggressive claim. I have sought to explain the reasons for such semantic and pragmatic effect: although both the winemaker and I have an accent, because both of us can perceive the accent of the other only as difference from one's own, it is only the winemaker who feels *entitled* to ask "where is your accent from?", as it is only me who feels *obliged* to answer indicating an elsewhere from which my accent is from.

I have also sought to demonstrate that the question already implies not only the right to ask, but also the semantic limits within which an answer can be given. I have suggested that the entitlement to ask stems from the relation between the accent and the place from which the question is enunciated, the *here* of the question. I have also added that this relation is in reality complicated by the fact that both the winemaker's accent and mine are implicitly confronted with an "ideal" accent, that is, the accent characterizing the category of people who are entitled to ask where accents different from theirs are from.

I have claimed that, from a strictly sociolinguistic point of view, there is no reason for which I should not feel less entitled to ask the winemaker where his accent is from than he feels entitled to ask me. Moreover, he should not feel less obliged to answer than I. Yet, the relation between the winemaker's accent and mine, between these two accents and the place where the small talk *takes place*, and the relation between the two accents and the 'ideal accent' described above is such that questioning is possible in one direction only.

Summarizing, the question "where is your accent from?", although distractedly dropped in the middle of a small talk, means: my accent is from here, and your accent is not. I am entitled not to know the elsewhere where your accent is from, and you are obliged to know where my accent is from. I am entitled to ask, and you are obliged to answer. The roles cannot be reversed, because it is you who are bringing to this place, the place where my accent is from, an accent that is not from here, but from an elsewhere. In a way, what the winemaker is saying — or rather, what society is saying though him — in his small talk is: show me the passport of your accent, because your accent has entered my country, and I have the right to control the identity of foreign accents that enter my country. Hence, asking the winemaker where his accent was from would have been like asking the custom officers at the Tullamarine airport in Melbourne to show me their passports before I enter the country.

Scenario 2: I make small talk with the winemaker, and at some stage the winemaker asks me: “where are you from?”

This is one of the most commonly asked questions in the world. It is the mother of all small–talk questions. Yet, despite its pervasiveness, few people wonder about its meaning. Few people wonder what this sentence really means when we distractedly drop it during a conversation, mostly at the beginning of a small talk. What does the global society say through us when we ask this global question? And why is it so common? Why is not the question “are you happy?” or another question whatsoever more common than “where are you from?”

When the winemaker asked me “where is your accent from?” at first I was surprised by this question, not only because nobody had ever asked me this question before, but also because the question sounded as kind to me, at least in the beginning. And why did it sound kind? Exactly because it replaced the question “where are you from?”

In the next paragraphs, I will seek to analyze what the question “where are you from?” means, and what the question “where is your accent from?” means in comparison with the previous question.

In order to understand the meaning of the question “where are you from?”, and especially its meaning in a small talk, we should enquire about its phenomenology. When is it that we ask “where are you from?” Of course, this is not a question we would ask an acquaintance: it would make no sense to ask my mother “where are you from?”.

However, this is not either a question that we would ask anyone we do not know. We ask this question only when we presuppose that the person is not from the place in which the question is asked. Like the question “where is your accent from?” the question “where are you from?” immediately projects the interlocutor in an elsewhere, or rather, it rejects her toward an elsewhere, a somewhere that is not the place where the small talk is taking place.

In other words, whenever we ask “where are you from?” we assume that the person with whom we speak *must* be from somewhere else, and *cannot* be from the place where the question is asked.

The next step in the phenomenology of the question "where are you from?" is: when and why do we decide that this question must be asked? Or, adopting the point of view suggested above, when does the historical and socio–cultural context in which we live push us to ask this question, asks this question through us?

We ask: "where are you from?" every time something in the phenomenology of the interlocutor tells us that the interlocutor must be from elsewhere. But what is this something? Again, it is a relation between the way in which the interlocutor appears to us, the way in which she sounds to us, the way in which our senses perceive her, and the place in which this phenomenology of the interlocutor is taking place. Just as in the previous scenario, so also in this one, such relation involves the presence of an 'ideal persona', a persona that shows all the requisites to be from a certain place.

An example will clarify what I mean. Most university exams in Italy are oral. Several times per year I examine hundreds of students and give them a grade. It can be a very tiresome task, and sometimes I run out of fresh questions. At times, in order to regenerate my energies (or, according to the theory *supra*, in order to control my increasing nervousness) I make some small talk with students. I never ask students where they are from, for reasons that will be evident soon, I hope. Yet, I cannot help noticing that in some cases the phenomenology of the student prompts this question to my mind more than in others. Why is it so? I wondered.

This question comes to my mind every time I infer from the way in which the student looks that she must not be from where the exam is taking place. But what triggers this inference? What elements in the student's phenomenology turn into signs of the fact that she is or she is not from *here*? More fundamentally: what does it mean to be from a place?[27] And when does this being from a place manifest itself? When does it not?

Does "being from a place" mean being born in a place? Of course, it does not. I might be born somewhere but not feel like answering that I am from this somewhere. Or does the question refer to where I have spent the longest part of my life? The issue is not as simple as that.

---

[27] The meaning of 'being from a place' is one of the major topics of 20th–century philosophical investigation, from Heidegger on. For a fundamental contribution, cfr Derrida 1997; for a survey on the concept of belonging mostly in anthropological and sociological literature, cfr Leone forthcoming a.

First of all, we should start from the consideration that this ‘place’ from which we are from is not always the same. It is not something inherent to our persona. If it was, we would answer the question “where are you from?” always in the same way. But we do not. When I am in Torino, the city where I live and work, but where I did not grow up, sometimes people suspect, for instance from my accent, that I am not from there. Therefore, they ask me: “where are you from?” On these occasions, I feel almost compelled to answer: “Lecce”, the city where I was born and grew up.

However, when I visit my parents in Lecce people there too sometimes suspect that I am not from there, and there too they ask me: “where are you from?”. In this case the somewhere from which I am cannot be described as simply as above. I must explain that I was born in Lecce, but my father did not have an accent from Lecce, and anyway I spent most of my adult life in other cities, etc. etc.

When I am abroad, the somewhere changes again: it’s not a single Italian city (first answer), or a path across several Italian and non–Italian cities (second answer), but a whole country. “I am from Italy”, I answer.

The meaning we attach to “being from somewhere” changes according to the context of enunciation in which it is spoken, to the place in which we are asked where we are from, and depending on the identity of the interlocutor who asks us the question “where are you from?”

As it was pointed out earlier, such question presupposes an answer, but also presupposes that, at least according to our interlocutor, we are not from the place where the question is being asked, and thus we must be from elsewhere.

The emotional effect of this question also changes according to its context of enunciation. In the beginning of my stay in Torino, for instance, years ago, I considered it as quite normal that people would ask me where I was from. I did not feel that I was from there, and people who felt they were from there felt entitled to ask me where I was from.

As years passed, though, I could not help finding the question "where are you from?" more and more irritating. I was living in Torino, working in Torino, paying tax in Torino, electing my political representatives in Torino, but still people would ask me: "where are you from?" only on the basis of the fact that, to them, I sounded like someone who was not from there. They could not tell where I was from, but they could tell I was not from there.[28]

But why is the question "where are you from?" irritating? Why is it irritating especially when we feel that we are from the place in which the question is asked? My claim is that this question is irritating because it does not only ask where we are from, but also implicitly affirms that we do not belong to the place in which the question is asked and, as a consequence, that the place in which the question is asked does not belong to us.

The question "where are you from?" implicitly says "you do not belong here". It implicitly means: you do not look like someone who belongs here. But how does one look like someone who belongs to a place? When does one look like someone who should not be asked "where are you from?"

This is one of the most important, but also one of the most complex questions that present–day societies face. How should I look, sound, smell, dress, walk, talk, behave, dance, eat, pray etc. to be *from* somewhere?[29]

It is evident that, at least in Italy, being from Italy to most people means "sounding Italian", as well as being from a specific city in Italy to most people means "sounding from that city". Having a non–Italian accent, as well as having an accent that is not from the city, immediately prompts the question "where are you from?"

7. On the illusion of being from somewhere

On the basis of these reflections, it is interesting to compare the question "where are you from" with the question the winemaker asked me in Australia. "Where is you accent from?" reveals a semiotic ideology[30] according to which accents and people can be separated. I can be from a place, although my accent is not, and vice versa.

---

[28] Cfr the irritation of Lebanon–born Australian intellectual Ghassan Hage on being "welcomed" in Australia after years of living in the country (Hage 2000); for a narrative reflection on the centrality of the question "where are you from?" in Australia, cfr Tsiolkas 2005.

[29] For a dramatic legal dimension of this question, cfr the controversy recently spurred by the April 2010 Arizona immigration bill, authorizing police officers to stop suspected illegal immigrants and demand proof of citizenship.

In Italy, most people would never ask the question "where is your accent from?" instead of the question "where are you from?", because the predominant semiotic ideology does not separate between people and accents. If your accent is not from a place, you cannot be from that place. You must be from the place from which your accent is.

In Italy, one does not only *have* an accent; one *is* her accent. Her identity is inseparable from her accent. In Australia, at least to the winemaker, my accent is not included in the phenomenology that signifies where I am from and whether I am or I am not from the place. I might well be from Australia, although my accent does not sound Australian.

Does this comparison suggest that the Australian question, "where is your accent from?" is more inclusive than the Italian question, "where are you from?" In a way, it does. It suggests that the question "where is your accent from?" implies that the fact of belonging or not belonging to a place, and, as a consequence, the fact that a place belongs or does not belong to us, does not depend on the accent we have. We can be from Australia whereas our accent is from elsewhere.

However, does the comparison suggest that the Australian question is perfectly inclusive? It does not. It suggests, on the contrary, that the question is not inclusive in a subtler, more politically correct[31] way than the Italian question is. The presupposition that the interlocutor does not belong to the place in which the question is asked is synecdochically moved from a generic focus on the entire person to a specific focus on the person's accent. It is as though the question was saying: "you might well be from Australia, but your accent is not. There is one and only one accent that is from here, and that accent is mine".

The Italian question is exclusive in a more brutal way, but also in a way that is easier to decode. It is as though the question was saying: "your accent is not from here, ergo you cannot be from here".

---

[30] For a brief introduction to the concept of "semiotic ideology" cfr Leone forthcoming b.

[31] For a recent cultural history of the semantics of political correctness, cfr Hughes 2010.

This is probably a general trend: societies that have embraced the ideology of multiculturalism, such as the UK, Canada, or Australia, do not discriminate people in such a blatant way as societies that have not endorsed it. However, this does not mean that discrimination is absent in multicultural societies: on the contrary, it is transformed into ways that are probably less blatant, but also more difficult to detect, decode, and defeat.[32]

In Italy, or in societies that embrace the same semiotic ideology, you are from the same place from which your personal phenomenology is. If you speak Italian with a Romanian accent, most people will not think “this person is Italian but speaks Italian with a non–Italian accent”. On the contrary, most people will think: “this person speaks Italian with a non–Italian accent; ergo, this person is not Italian”. And the same goes for your skin, your clothes, your posture, etc. etc. In other words: the limits of the personal phenomenology that define you as being from Italy are quite rigid.

In Australia, or in societies that embrace the same semiotic ideology, in theory one might be from Australia although her personal phenomenology is not. In other words: the limits of the personal phenomenology that define one as being from Australia are quite flexible. However, this does not mean that whatever personal phenomenology is considered as Australian. It means, on the contrary, that one might be considered as Australian *despite* her personal phenomenology.

It means that, despite the fact that one’s accent sounds from elsewhere, and her complexion looks from elsewhere, and so do her cloths, her postures, her food, her car, her music, etc., *despite* all this, she is Australian.

But what does it mean to be Australian, or British, or Canadian, if one is so despite her entire personal phenomenology? What does it mean that one is from one of these multicultural societies if her entire personal phenomenology is not?

My claim is that, in Australia or in other multicultural societies, as long as one is considered as belonging to the place, and, as a consequence, that the place belongs to her, *despite* the fact that she does not look from the place, one's being from the place is actually empty, is an abstract formula. The fact that people, or at least those who are politically correct, do not ask any longer "where are you from?" but "where is your accent from?" does not imply that one might be from the place whilst one's accent is not. It implies, on the contrary, that one might be from the place only if one leaves her entire personal phenomenology outside of the frontiers of the place.

---

[32] Bibliography on multiculturalism and cultural pluralism is extensive and continues to grow. Critical points of view on the multiculturalism of Australia, Canada, and the UK are also legions. For an effective introduction on the weak points of Australian multiculturalism, Vasta and Castles 1996 and Hage 2000.

In multicultural societies, people might have learned how to dissociate the way in which other people look from the fact that they might, or might not, be from the place; however, this dissociation does nothing but empty the meaning of being from a place. If I am from a place as a civic noumenon, but not as a civic phenomenon, as an abstract persona, but not as an embodied persona, what does it really mean that I am from the place?

The semiotic ideology of present–day non–multicultural societies is brutal but probably easier to deal with. In Italy, it is immediately clear that, if one wishes to have an easier live, one better learns to speak Italian without an accent, puts away her ethnic cloths, disguises the features of her complexion that "do not look Italian", etc. as much as one can. It is clear that power in the Italian society, in all its dimensions — social, economic, political, symbolic power — is linked with the way in which one's phenomenology identifies her as being from Italy. Unfortunately, people who "do not look from Italy" are given many opportunities to learn how this "not looking from Italy" gives them an inferior access to sources of power.[33]

In Australia, or in other multicultural societies, the fact that one is labeled as "being Australian, or British, or Canadian" although "she does not look Australian, or British, or Canadian", gives one the illusion that her personal phenomenology has nothing to do with the fact that she might or might not be considered as someone who belongs to the place, and therefore who has unrestrained access to the sources of power in that place.

---

[33] Literature on the social conditions of immigrants in Italy is rapidly expanding. Among the most recent studies, cfr Bonifazi 2007, Torgnetti Bordogna 2008, Macioti and Pugliese 2010, Ricucci 2010; on 'Italian–style' multiculturalism, cfr Grillo and Pratt 2002.

However, this is nothing but an illusion. It is one's personal phenomenology, and not one's abstract definition as someone who is from a place, that gives her access to the sources of social, economic, and political power in a given place. It is not as a civic noumenon that one interacts with other people, with groups, and with institutions, but as a civic phenomenon with an accent, and a complexion, and a whole range of elements composing one's personal phenomenology.

As long as these elements are considered as being from elsewhere, it does not really matter that one is considered as being from the place. Her being from the place is such an abstract formula that it says very little about the actual relation between one's body, a place, and other bodies in the same place. It says little about the extent to which one's body, with all its biological and cultural peculiarities, is considered as entitled to be in the place and to act in the place.

8. Conclusion

Is this essay suggesting that we should not ask any longer "where are you from?" or "where is your accent from?"? It would be too easy if we could solve all the problems of our more or less multicultural societies simply by eliminating a couple of questions. It is not the questions themselves that are at stake here, but the semiotic ideology behind them, a semiotic ideology according to which the personal phenomenology of people is immediately judged in comparison with an 'ideal personal phenomenology', exactly as my accent in the conversation with the winemaker was judged in comparison with an 'ideal accent'. In the framework of this semiotic ideology, every place has a privileged relation with a specific ideal personal phenomenology, and the more a real personal phenomenology differs from the ideal one, the more this privileged relation is considered as challenged. Since the ideal personal phenomenology is not real, but a model, the relation between real personal phenomenologies and the ideal one is not a black and white matter but a matter of nuances of grey. The 'ideal Italian body', for instance, existed only in the nationalist deliriums of the Fascist regime, wittily mocked by Roberto Benigni in *Life is Beautiful* when — having accidentally replaced a Fascist general for a speech in a primary school — he displays his "Italian knees" to a crowd of laughing kids.

However, there are limits beyond which even the post–fascist 'ideal phenomenology' of the Italian body cannot be stretched. Italian soccer player Mario Balotelli, for instance, has been considered by the supporters of Juventus as 'too black' to be from Italy.[34]

In other circumstances, the limits of the 'ideal personal phenomenology' manifest themselves with subtler exclusionary logics. For instance, in most predominantly non–Islamic societies, even in those that have embraced, at least officially, a multicultural semiotic ideology, the fact that a woman wears a veil is sufficient to make her personal phenomenology appear as so different from that of the ideal female phenomenology of that place that she is immediately considered as 'not from that place', as someone who does not belong to the place.

As globalization increases the cultural complexity of present–day societies, the relation between place, persona, and belonging will become more and more problematic. Individuals and groups will develop new mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, and the ancestral question "where are you from?" will be not only loaded with new connotations, but also replaced by new multicultural questions such as "where is your accent from?". Semiotics and the other language studies might not be able to suggest an answer to these old and new questions, but they will definitely be able to shed light on the answers which these questions presuppose.

Bibliographic references

Abercrombie D. (1998) "Phatic communion", in J.L. Mey (ed.) (1998) *Concise Encyclopedia of Pragmatics*, Elsevier, Amsterdam et al.: 672–3.

Ameka F. (1992) *The Meaning of Phatic and Conative Interjections*, "Journal of Pragmatics" 18: 245–71.

Australian Bureau of Statistics (2006) *2006 Census Tables*, www.censusdata.abs.gov.au, accessed 17.05.2010.

---

[34] In April 2009, Balotelli scored Inter's goal in a 1–1 draw with Juventus, and was racially abused by Juventus fans throughout the game, including chants such as "a Black Italian does not exist". Cfr Corriere dello Sport 2009.

Beinstein J. (1975) *Small Talk as Social Gesture*, “Journal of Communication”, 25: 147–54.

Benveniste É. (1962) *Les Niveaux de l’analyse linguistique*, in H.G. Lunt (ed.) (1962) *Proceedings of the Ninth International Congress of Linguists* (Cambridge, Mass., 27–31 August 1962), Mouton, The Hague, republished in Id. (1966) *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, Gallimard, Parigi, ch. X.

Blommaert, J. (2010) *The Sociolinguistics of Globalization*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (UK) and New York.

Bonifazi C. (2007) *L’immigrazione straniera in Italia*, il Mulino, Bologna.

Bousfield D. (2008) *Impoliteness in Interaction*, John Benjamins Pub., Amsterdam and Philadelphia.

Bousfield D. and M.A. Locher (eds) (2008) *Impoliteness in Language: Studies on its Interplay with Power in Theory and Practice*, Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin and New York.

Caesar T. (2000) *In and Out of Elevators in Japan*, “Journal of Mundane Behavior”, 1, 1, www.mundanebehavior.org, accessed 17.05.2010.

Clyne M., C. Norrby, and J. Warren (eds) (2009) *Language and Human Relations: Style of Address in Contemporary Language*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (UK).

Collins, J. (1996) “The changing political economy of Australian racism”, in E. Vasta and S. Castles (1996) *The Teeth are Smiling: The Persistence of Racism in Multicultural Australia*, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, Australia: 73–96.

Collins, J., S. Slembrouck, and M. Baynham (eds) (2009) *Globalization and Language in Contact: Scale, Migration, and Communicative Practices*, Continuum, London and New York.

Comorovski I. (1996) *Interrogative Phrases and the Syntax–Semantics Interface*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht and Boston.

Constantini M. e I. Darrault–Harris (eds) (1996) *Sémiotique, phénoménologie, discours: du corps présent au sujet énonçant: en hommage à Jean–Claude Coquet*, l’Harmattan, Paris and Montreal.

Coquet J.–C. (2007) *Phusis et logos: une phénoménologie du langage*. Vincennes: Presses Universitaires de Vincennes.

Corriere dello Sport (2009) *Juve–Inter: cori razzisti, indagini*, 19 aprile.

Cosenza G. (ed.) (2001) *Paul Grice’s Heritage*, Brepols, Turnhout (Belgium).

Cosenza G. (2002) *La pragmatica di Paul Grice: intenzioni, significato, comunicazione*, Bompiani, Milan.

Coupland J. (ed.) (2000) *Small Talk*, Longman, Harlow (UK).

——. (ed.) (2003) *Small Talk: Social Functions*, monographic issue of “Research on Language and Social Interaction”, 36, 1.

Coupland N. and V. Ylänne–McEwen (2000) “Talk about the Weather: Small Talk, Leisure Talk and the Travel Industry”, in Coupland J. (ed.) (2000) *Small Talk*, Longman, Harlow (UK): 163–82.

Courtés J. (1998) *L’énonciation comme acte sémiotique*, PULIM, Limoges.

Derrida J. (1997) *De l'Hospitalité: Anne Dufourmantelle invite Jacques Derrida à répondre*, Calmann–Lévy, Paris.

Drew P. and J. Heritage (eds) (1998) *Talk at Work. Interaction in Institutional Settings*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (UK).

——. (eds) (2006) *Conversation Analysis*, 4 vols, SAGE, London and Thousand Oaks, Calif.

Eckard R. (1994) *Sagen und Meinen: Paul Grices Theorie des Konversations Implikaturen*, Westdeutscher Verlag, Opladen (Germany).

Ericksen E.G. (1980) *The Territorial Experience — Human Ecology as Symbolic Interaction*, University of Texas Press, Austin (TX).

Farrell M. and M. Dos (2008) *Ventinueve maneras de concebir el silencio*, Diputació de Castelló, Castelló.

Ferraris M. (2005) *Dove sei? Ontologia del telefonino*, Tascabili Bompiani, Milan.

Feuer A. (2008) *Who does this Language Belong to? Personal Narratives of Language Claim and Identity*, IAP–Information Age Pub., Charlotte (NC).

Fiengo R. (2007) *Asking Questions: Using Meaningful Structures to Imply Ignorance*, Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford (UK).

Fisseha, K. (2009) *Linguistic Discrimination: Accent Perception in the Boston Apartment Rental*, unpublished thesis (BA honors in economico, Harvard University).

Fleming C. (2004) *René Girard: Violence and Mimesis*, Polity, Malden (UK) and Cambridge (MA).

Geis M. (1995) *Speech Acts and Conversational Interaction*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (UK).

Geschiere P. (2009) *The Perils of Belonging: Autochthony, Citizenship, and Exclusion in Africa and Europe*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Ginzburg J. (2001) *Interrogative Investigations: the Form, Meaning, and Use of English Interrogatives*, CSLI Publications, Stanford.

Girard, R. (2007) *Evolution and Conversion: Dialogues on the Origins of Culture*, T&T Clark, London and New York.

Glenn C. (2004) *Unspoken: a Rhetoric of Silence*, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale (IL).

Gobber G. (1999) *Pragmatica delle frasi interrogative: con applicazioni al tedesco, al polacco e al russo*, I.S.U. Università Cattolica Milano, Milan.

Goffman E. (1961) *Encounters: Two Studies in the Sociology of Interaction*, Bobbs–Merrill, Indianapolis.

——. (1967) *Interactional Ritual: Essays in Face–to–Face Behavior*, Aldine Pub. Co., Chicago.

——. (1971) *Relations in Public: Microstudies of the Public Order*, Basic Books, New York.

Goody E. (ed.) (1978) *Questions and Politeness: Strategies in Social Interaction*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Grillo R. and J. Pratt (eds) (2002) *The Politics of Recognizing Difference: Multiculturalism Italian–Style*, ldershot, Ashgate, Hampshire (UK); Burlington (VT).

Guillaume B. (2006) *Approche énonciative des "question tags" en anglais contemporain*, Ophrys DL, Paris.

Haeussler E. (2005) *Des Figures de la violence: introduction à la pensée de René Girard*, l'Harmattan, Paris.

Hage G. (2000) *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society*, Routledge, London and New York; Pluto Press, Annandale (NSW).

Haraguchi S. (1991) *A Theory of Stress and Accent*, Foris Publications, Dordrecht, Holland; Providence (RI).

Harrington J. (2006) *An Acoustic Analysis of "Happy Tensing" in the Queen's Christmas Broadcasts*, "Journal of Phonetics", 34: 439–57.

Henning T. (2009) *Person sein und Geschichten erzählen: eine Studie über personale Autonomie und narrative Gründe*, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin and New York.

Hentschel E. (1998) *Negation und Interrogation: Studien zur Universalität ihrer Funktionen*, Niemeyer, Tübingen.

Holk A.G.F. van (1975) *Semiotic Aspects of the Interrogative*, Peter de Ridder, Lisse (Netherlands).

Hughes G. (2010) *Political Correctness: a History of Semantics and Culture*, Wiley–Blackwell, Chichester (UK) and Malden (MA).

Hyvärinen, A. *et al.* (eds) (2010) *Beyond Narrative Coherence*, John Benjamins Pub., Amsterdam and Philadelphia.

Hiz H. (1978) *Questions*, D. Reidel, Dordrecht and Boston.

Jakobson R. (1960) "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics", in T.A. Sebeok (ed.) *Style in Language*, MIT Press, New York and Wiley, London: 350–77.

——. (1973) "Functions of Language", in: J.P.B. Allen and S. Pit Corder (eds) (1973) *Reading for Applied Linguistics. The Edinburgh Course in Applied Linguistics*, vol. 1, Oxford University Press, Oxford (UK): 53–5.

Jaworski A. (ed.) (1997) *Silence: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin and New York.

——. (2000) "Silence and Small Talk", in Coupland, J. (ed.) (2000) *Small Talk*, Longman, Harlow (UK): 110–32.

Kallia A. (2007) *Politeness and Implicature: Expanding the Cooperative Principle*, Verlag Dr. Kovač, Hamburg.

Kerbrat–Orecchioni C. (ed.) (1991) *La Question*, Presses universitaires de Lyon, Lyon.

LaCapra, D. (2004) *History in Tranxit: Experience, Identity, Critical Theory*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca (NY).

Lakoff R.T. and S. Ide (eds) (2005) *Broadening the Horizon of Linguistic Politeness*, John Benjamins Pub, Amsterdam and Philadelphia.

Laver, J. (1975) "Communicative Functions of Phatic Communion", in A. Kendon, R.M. Harris, and M.R. Key (eds) (1975) *Organisation of Behavior in Face–to–Face Interaction*, Mouton, The Hague and Paris: 215–38.

Leone M. (2009) "Iranian *ta'ârof* and Italian *cerimonie*: on the semiotics of politeness", 2: 904–4, in E. Tarasti (ed.) (2009) *Communication: Understanding/Misunderstanding*. Proceedings of the 9th Congress of the International Association for Semiotic Studies held in Helsinki and Imatra, June 2007, 3 vols. Special Issue of *Acta Semiotica Fennica*, 34.

——. (forthcoming a) Hearing and Belonging: On Sounds, Faiths, and Laws", *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law.*

——. (forthcoming b) "Semiotic Ideology and its Metamorphoses", in D. Teters (ed.) (2010) *Metamorphoses of the World*, Latvian Academy of Culture, Riga.

Lu, S. (1997) *Intercultural Small Talk: An Ethnographic Analysis of Interactions among Chinese and Americans*, Dissertation Abstracts International A (Humanities and Social Sciences) 58(6): 1986.

Macioti M.I. e E. Pugliese (2010) *L'esperienza migratoria: immigrati e rifugiati in Italia*, Laterza, Rome–Bari.

Malinowski, Bronislaw (1972) "Phatic Communion" (1923), in J. Laver and S. Hutcheson (eds) (1972) *Communication in Face to Face Interaction*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 146–52.

Manetti G. (2008) *L'enunciazione: dalla svolta comunicativa ai nuovi media*, Mondadori Università, Milan.

Marrone G. (2004) *C'era una volt ail telefonino: indagine socio–semiotica*, Meltemi, Rome.

Munro M. and V. Mann (2005) *Age of immersion as a predictor of foreign accent*, "Applied Psycholinguistics", 26: 311–41.

Nakane I. (2007) *Silence in Intercultural Communication: Perceptions and Performance*, J. Benjamins Pub. Co., Amsterdam and Philadelphia.

Nunan D. and J. Choi (eds) (2010) *Language and Culture: Reflective Narratives and the Emergence of Identity*, Routledge, New York and London (UK).

Ono A. (2007) *La Notion d'énonciation chez Émile Benveniste*, Lambert–Lucas, Limoges.

Parret H. (1987) *Prolégomènes à la théorie de l'énonciation: de Husserl à la pragmatique*, P. Lang, Bern–Frankfort–Paris.

Palaver W. (2003) *René Girards mimetische Theorie: im Kontext kulturtheoretischer und gesellschaftspolitischer Fragen*, LIT, Münster.

Paumgarten N. (2008) *Up and then down*, April 21, 2008, www.newyorker.com, accessed 17.05.2010.

Preston D.R. and N. Niedzielski (eds) (2010) *A Reader in Sociophonetics*, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin and New York.

Rall M. (1996) *Von der Freundlichkeit in der Welt: Über die phatische Funktion der Sprache im interkulturellen Dialog*, "Unterrichtspraxis" 29: 12–20.

Reigen H. (1992) *Face–to–face Interaktion: ein Beitrag zur Soziologie Erving Goffmans*, P. Lang, Frankfurt am Main and New York.

Ricucci R. (2010) *Italiani a metà: giovani stranieri crescono*, il Mulino, Bologna.

Rost–Roth M. (2006) *Nachfragen: Formen und Funktionen äusserungsbezogener Interrogationen*, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin and New York.

Schneider K.P. (1988) *Small Talk. Analysing Phatic Discourse*, Hitzeroth, Marburg.

——. (2008) "Small talk in England, Ireland, and the USA", in K.P. Schneider and

A. Barron (eds) (2008) *Variational Pragmatics: A Focus on Regional Varieties in Pluricentric Languages*, Benjamins, Amsterdam/Philadelphia: 99–139.

Skuttnab–Kangas T., R. Phillipson, and M. Rannut (eds) (1994) *Linguistic Human Rights: Overcoming Linguistic Discrimination*, Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin and New York.

Somerville J. (2002) *The Epistemological Significance of the Interrogative*, Aldershot, Hants (UK); Ashgate, Burlington (VT).

Straniero G. (2004) *Faccia a faccia: Interazione sociale e osservazione partecipante nell'opera di Ervin Goffman*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino.

Thompson I. (1991) *Foreign Accents Revisited: the English Pronunciation of Russian Immigrants*, "Language Learning", 41, 2: 177–204.

Torgnetti Bordogna M. (2008) *Arrivare non basta: complessità e fatica della migrazione*, FrancoAngeli, Milan.

Tringham R. (ed.) (1973) *Territoriality and Proxemics: Archaeological and Ethnographic Evidence for the Use and Organization of Space*, Warner Modular Publications, Andover, (MA).

Tsiolkas C. (2005) *Dead Europe*, Vintage, Milsons Point (NSW).

Ulsamer F. (2002) *Linguistik des Schweigens: eine kulturgeschichte des kommunikativen Schweigens*, P. Lang, Frankfurt am Main and New York.

Valentin P. (ed.) (1985) *L'Interrogation: actes du colloque tenu les 19 et 20 décembre 1983 par le Département de linguistique de Paris–Sorbonne*, Presses de l'Université de Paris–Sorbonne, Paris.

Vasta E. and S. Castles (1996) *The Teeth are Smiling: The Persistence of Racism in Multicultural Australia*, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, Australia.

Violi, P. (2001) *Meaning and Experience* (1997), Engl. trans. J. Carden, Indiana University Press, Bloomington (IN).

Watts R.J., S. Ide, and K. Ehlich (eds) (2005) *Politeness in Language: Studies in its History, Theory, and Practice*, Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin and New York.

Wells J.C. (1982) *Accents of English*, 3 voll., Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.