

Reading and Doing Ethnography

Social Anthropology 314

3.3 Dialogues

A Life Lost

Pierre L., age 59, and Henri F. are two very active farmers in a region that has been hit hard by the number of inhabitants who have either left for the city or remained single. In contrast to most of the men in their generation, these two can certainly be counted as successful.

Double binds

Scattered about in their out-of-the-way farms and traditionally attached to the freedoms of independent workers, farmers are henceforth tied down by the invisible threads of governmental dependence, by its omnipresent regulations and the subsidies that are as essential as they are uncertain. And it is also understandable how these men, raised to abhor disorder and sloppiness (which they identify with the city life against which, once they decided not to leave the land, they built their whole life) and almost in spite of themselves, could be led to participate in demonstrations against the prefecture; how the random violence brought on by the many *double binds* to which they are subjected sometimes reaches an extreme in a sort of suicidal sacrifice (killing livestock)...

Start of the interview

Pierre L. Farming is going to become more and more difficult. Because there are problems of cultivation in the first place and then there are often family problems. That's the case with me for example. There's the health question too. With me slowing down (...) in principle my son is on his own ... at least for the big jobs. And one farmer on a farm, one man by himself can't do it... (...)Ten years from now...seven out of ten men will be single (...), a lot of farms will be ready to be freed up. But the question is, how are they going to be freed up?

Henri F. There are going to be farmers' sons who will stay on, and they are going to have an overabundance of property to choose from; they won't be able to take care of everything.

Pierre L. But can they get hold of them?

Henri F. But if they get hold of them ...

Pierre L. Because you'll see ... look at our neighbor, he sells livestock and leases out his land. I talked things over with him, I knew him (...) I had an idea how much he was asking. He told me "I admit it, it's not you farmers who are going to be able to pay... Those of us who sell livestock, we put out a few animals, they'll fatten up there, but you can't ..., " (...) It's necessary to "have guarantees for farmers who lease their land".

A disappointment, a very big disappointment

Henri F. Now, the young men, they marry girls who aren't ... who have another job, for example. As for me, because I'm the district's agricultural delegate, that's my battle with the young men around here (...) I say to them "everything's fine as long as they've got the old man to help out. But the day they find themselves – and it's likely to be the young guy whose wife will be off somewhere else – when they find themselves all alone at noon staring at a plate"; if he's got a couple of kids to take care of, and all by himself to work. Then and there, it won't do him any good to have a lot of land ... because he won't be able to take care of it anymore ...

Take me, I've just married off my son (...) he doesn't live with us. He went off to her grandmother's. For me, it was a disappointment, a very big disappointment. Because I had spent the year fixing up the place a bit. It was at the last minute, he said no, "my wife decided that we can't start out living with our parents. But she's not going to live alone, she's going to live with her grandmother ... " There, I was really disappointed. As soon as you get married to someone who is not in farming, all those government employees or office workers these days (...) these people have too much free time compared to the farmer. Right away the young farmer gives up, whether he wants to or not. They have to have the weekend, an hour free in the evening, and too bad if the alarm clock doesn't go off early enough ... It's becoming serious. If we were able to make a go of it, our generation, it's because we didn't watch the clock.

Pierre L. Where are you going to look for a girl who's in farming?

Interview with a precarious French worker

Eli: So you want to keep going?

Adam: Uh, yes. But...

Eli: You want to become a professor?

Adam: A prof! No, I don't think so.

Eli: Not like her [Adam's supervisor, Hélène]?

Adam: Huh?

Eli: You don't want to be the sort of prof in political history that she is?

Adam: It's not that I don't want to, but [laughs], the question, it's a little simplistic.

Eli: Fair enough — listen, you're free to tell me that my questions are dumb! That doesn't bother me.

Adam: It's not dumb, but, if you like, maybe five years earlier, if I hadn't dragged on so long, I could maybe tell you, yeah, I want to do a dissertation, try to finish fairly quickly, and then dedicate my life to doing that, try to become a prof. Well, maybe first a high school teacher and eventually a prof in the university; there are plenty of possible routes. But, that wasn't what I wanted, and, um, pfft, well, finally, now it's not what I want either.

Eli: Yeah, you don't really give the impression that you're excited to spend five, ten years on a dissertation.

Adam: Yes, yes, I think that that would wear me out quick, like. Unfortunately. Since I've had a tendency, as I was telling you, to change my path several times.

Eli: Well, that's not necessarily a bad thing.

Adam: No, but, well, that, I get it from my dad, who has done every job in existence.
[laughs]

Eli: Yes.

Adam: And me, I did the same thing in my studies, and at work too, I've had a lot of different jobs, but, like many people today who do odd jobs, but it's true that that — The fact of not settling on a thing and holding onto it, I get that from my dad, and [laughs], and moreover, it's changing. But then it's true that, with H  l  ne, I've done things that came together; it means something when everything all hooks together, you say to yourself, the master's thesis, the work that I had done beforehand, the regional archives, the research in the campus archives too, then the exhibit, you see, there's a coherence. And it's true that I'm happy, as a matter of fact. It turned out to help me a lot, absolutely, to stick with something after all. But am I going to keep working in this domain, I dunno. I was going to ask, I might know someone in the library, about the campus archives.

Eli: Yes.

Adam: They have archives there, because, me, I had done research in archives elsewhere, in other sites. I don't know what that ended up with, whether they need someone or not. Even if they need someone — I'm not sure I'm the one they'd take, and if they'd want to do that. Since they have other worries these days.

Eli: Yes, like you said.

Adam: Yes, and it's not going so well. Eli: It's getting worse?

Adam: Yes, somewhat. (sighs)

About interviews

- >> Not all interviews are formal interviews with written questions.
- >> There's a spectrum of formality and informality.
- >> There's a range of recording methods as well.

Recording methods

- >> Tape recorder
- >> Notes during the interview
- >> Notes afterwards

Summary vs. word-by-word style.

To interview, you must
learn to listen very
precisely

Listening in interviews

- >> Hear the precise way that things are phrased.
- >> Hear the presuppositions and assumptions implied by someone's speech.
- >> Hear the assumptions someone is making about you.
- >> Observe the roles of anyone else involved (bystanders, overhearers).

Listening exercise

Stories can be told in
many ways

Raymond Queneau, Exercises de Style

Retrograde

You ought to put another button on your overcoat, his friend told him. I met him in the middle of the Cour de Rome, after having left him rushing avidly towards a seat. He had just protested against being pushed by another passenger who, he said, was jostling him every time anyone got off. This scraggy young man was the wearer of a ridiculous hat. This took place on the platform of an S bus which was full that particular midday.

Raymond Queneau, Exercises de Style

Notation

In the S bus, in the rush hour. A chap of about 26, felt hat with a cord instead of a ribbon, neck too long, as if someone's been having a tug-of-war with it. People getting off. The chap in question gets annoyed with one of the men standing next to him. He accuses him of jostling him every time anyone goes past. A snivelling tone which is meant to be aggressive. When he sees a vacant seat he throws himself on to it. Two hours later, I meet him in the Cour de Rome, in front of the gare Saint-Lazare. He's with a friend who's saying: "You ought to get an extra button put on your overcoat." He shows him where (at the lapels) and why.

Raymond Queneau, Exercises de Style

Litotes

Some of us were travelling together. A young man, who didn't look very intelligent, spoke to the man next to him for a few moments, then he went and sat down. Two hours later I met him again; he was with a friend and was talking about clothes.

Raymond Queneau, Exercises de Style

Dream

I had the impression that everything was misty and nacreous around me, with multifarious and indistinct apparitions, amongst whom however was one figure that stood out fairly clearly which was that of a young man whose too-long neck in itself seemed to proclaim the character at once cowardly and quarrelsome of the individual.

The ribbon of his hat had been replaced by a piece of plaited string. Later he was having an argument with a person whom I couldn't see and then, as if suddenly afraid, he threw himself into the shadow of a corridor.

Another part of the dream showed him walking in bright sunshine in front of the gare Saint-Lazare. He was with a companion who was saying: "You ought to have another button put on your overcoat."

Whereupon I woke up.

Raymond Queneau, Exercices de Style

Precision

In a bus of the S-line, 10 metres long, 3 wide, 6 high, at 3 km, 600 m. from its starting point, loaded with 48 people, at 12.17 p.m., a person of the masculine sex aged 27 years 3 months and 8 days, 1 m. 72 cm tall and weighing 65 kg, and wearing a hat 35 cm. in height round the crown of which was a ribbon 60 cm. long, interpellated a man aged 48 years 4 months and 3 days, 1 m. 68 cm tall and weighing 77 kg., by means of 14 words whose enunciation lasted 5 seconds and which alluded to some involuntary displacements of from 15 to 20 mm. Then he went and sat down about 1 m. 10 cm. away.

57 minutes later he was 10 metres away from the suburban entrance to the gare Saint-Lazare and was walking up and down over a distance of 30 m. with a friend aged 28, 1m. 70 cm. tall and weighing 71 kg, who advised him in 15 words to move by 5 cm. in the direction of the zenith a button which was 3 cm. in diameter.

Raymond Queneau, Exercises de Style

Negativities

It was neither a boat, nor an aeroplane, but a terrestrial means of transport. It was neither the morning, nor the evening, but midday. It was neither a baby, nor an old man, but a young man. It was neither a ribbon, nor a string, but a plaited cord. It was neither a procession, nor a brawl, but a scuffle. It was neither a pleasant person, nor an evil person, but a bad-tempered person. It was neither a truth, nor a lie, but a pretext. It was neither a standing person, nor a recumbent person, but a would-be-seated person. It was neither the day before, nor the day after, but the same day. It was neither the gare du Nord, nor the gare du P.-L.-M. but the gare Saint-Lazare. It was neither a relation, nor a stranger, but a friend. It was neither insult, nor ridicule, but sartorial advice.

Raymond Queneau, Exercises de Style

You Know

Well, you know, the bus arrived, so, you know, I got on. Then I saw, you know, a citizen who, you know, caught my eye, sort of. I mean, you know, I saw his long neck and I saw the plait round his hat. Then he started to, you know, rave, at the chap next to him. He was, you know, treading on his toes. Then he went and, you know, sat down.

Well, you know, later on, I saw him in the Cour de Rome. He was with a, you know, pal, and he was telling him, you know, the pal was: "You ought to get another button put on your coat." You know.