

# Reflexivity in anthropological discourse analysis

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## Abstract

To discuss reflexivity in anthropology is not a new approach. The purpose of this article is to examine the meaning of reflexivity for the hermeneutical or confessional anthropology, which has been endemic in social sciences ever since the publication of Malinowski's diaries and the onset of the recurrent and persistent crisis of objectivity that haunts modern scholarship. We have determined that anthropology is no longer a one-sided, self-centred, objective science. Today anthropology is interpreted for its subjectivity and its multiple faces that create a mosaic reflection of the anthropologist and the researcher. This article aims not to be innovative, for it is far from accomplishing such a task. This article, however, discusses the coherence of a discourse that emanates from contested narratives about the self. It responds to what some call the reflexive turn in anthropology – a homology between defamiliarisation and literary exposition, which undermines the fictionality (or the falsehood) of anthropological writing, in the sense that each reflexive critique is in its own right an autonomous interpretation, blurring the lines between the true and the imaginary (understood from Latin as a sort of plastic modelling, self-construction). Reflexivity is all: a turn into the deeper self, which denudes, and a hypothesis into the construction of meaning.

KEYWORDS: anthropology, reflexivity, fieldwork, Malinowski

## Introduction

Reflexivity is the process of reflection, which takes itself as the object; in the most basic sense, it refers to reflecting on *oneself* as the *object* of provocative, unrelenting thought and contemplation. Reflexivity makes a claim to self-reference (Davies 1998: 8). According to Myerhoff and Ruby, reflexivity generates 'heightened awareness and vertigo, the creative intensity of a possibility that loosens us from habit and custom and turns back to contemplate ourselves' (1982: 1). Reflexivity is a technical term that permeates critical literary discourse and social science research, as well as aspects of the autobiographical life of regular people; this has created a sudden, violent outburst of confusion regarding its everyday usage. As a term, reflexivity is ambiguous, poorly articulated, with scant sub-

stantial research evidence to back it up and it is used as a *passe partout* tool for referring to auto-critical thought and works. Reflexivity is an aspect of social and anthropological writing and research; however, its interest for literary studies lies in its universal *literarity* (*littérarité*). The contribution of this analysis is literary even though it describes a social science. Scholars in literature have much to learn from these attributes, because social science writing in anthropology is very much similar to autobiographical writing in literature in its variety of self-centred monologues, self-conscious analyses and writing focused on the 'I'. To write about anthropological writing in a literary journal may miss the point of literature; however, to do so is advocated according to the necessity to recognise the field as at least partly literary in nature. All of anthropologists' works depends on their meticulous note taking, and their success is determined by their rhetorical competence which occurs in monographs and self-exposing diaries, travel journals, etc.

## Roots

From the point of view of the author, narrator, or anthropologist-writer, reflexivity refers to what is otherwise known as the author's or discipline's *self-consciousness*. The word *reflexive* comes from the Latin *reflexus*, meaning bent back, which in turn comes from *reflectere* – to reflect. Reflexivity is a process as well as a *regard en arrière*, or *regard vers/sur soi-même*, which has imbued post-structural anthropological discourse with a focus on the narrator's proverbial *self*: self-examination, self-strategies, self-discovery, self-intuition, self-critique, self-determination, selfhood. The semantic content of *self* is fuzzy; however, there is a consensus that it makes a general reference to the debate over objectivity and subjectivity.

Responses to the attempts apparent raised by reflexivity involve attempts to ensure objectivity through reducing or controlling the effects of the researcher on the research situation. Such attempts include maintaining distance through using observation and other methods in which interaction is kept to a minimum or is highly controlled (Davies 2008: 4). These approaches have been identified with positivist and naturalist methodologies, respectively (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995: 16–7). It goes without saying that the most rigid, objectivist approaches are often accompanied by a great deal of reflexivity.

## Intricacies of fieldwork

It is impossible to totally eliminate the presence of authorship in fieldwork or research methodology: when designing surveys, it is part of human nature to leave an imprint and shape the results through the handling of structured or non-structured interviews (bias of the case study). The anthropologist projects his expectations on the results of the survey and his reflexivity makes him interpret the data according to specific thought patterns, prejudices, conceits and so on. Very often, the anthropologist gives shape to his results through his self-reflective personality. The results may be labelled as objective, but the anthropologist puts the final say on the interpretation of the data; he bestows his authentic signature upon his research. He is not lying about his results, and his results may be objective but only insofar as it is possible to maintain a distance through the subjective

handling of data. When the anthropologist uses these strategies, we can ascribe them to the literary qualities of his work. By handling the information in the way in which he does, the anthropologist is a *de facto* writer who shapes knowledge with a pinch of intimate details and self-referential information. The subjectivity of the researcher determines the outcome and establishes the mood of the monograph. The authentic signature of the author confers on it its individualism. The monograph is written based on self-analysis and reconstruction of past events, reordered to serve the narrative of the telling process.

## **Malinowski's reflexive turn**

The first instance of subjective writing in anthropology came with Malinowski, who called for a revamping of modern anthropology with his famous research journal in the Trobriand Islands. Malinowski's journal led to the reflexive turn in anthropology in 1915 when the author first became responsible for a crisis of objectivity concerning the fate of hermeutical anthropology. Malinowski has been known to curse his subjects of study (the Trobriand people) in his diary (intimate, personal journal), but he edified their human condition in his ethnographic monograph. He emphasised that objective methods were based on 'good sense and the anthropologist's psychological flair' within the kaleidoscope of tribal life (Malinowski 1963: 59). According to Malinowski, an anthropologist was a man who could distance himself from his subject of study enough to capture the results through synoptic tables or graphical representations, give a clear and coherent plan of the social structure of the tribe, without infantilising his subject of study through grotesque caricature (Malinowski 1963: 67). An anthropologist had to be attentive to detail, systematic and methodological. The objective of a scientific training was to give the scientist a mental chart upon which he could rely, which would subsequently guide him in his study. The point was to exhaust all means of obtaining information in order to create a larger series (a data pool) of facts, based on the empirical method.

Yet, despite all these attempts at objectivity, Malinowski left a present for posterity in the form of the journal which disclosed the hidden nature of the anthropologist (his racist slurs, his sexist remarks about touching indigenous women). If we are still 'in love' with Malinowski, it is out of tough love, because he made us despise him for his subjectivity and for having crossed all lines of objective reasoning. Malinowski brought reflexivity to the stage of the world community by positing himself as a crazy white man stationing at a resort for the purpose of his doctoral thesis for Frazer. By publishing his feelings in the form of the journal (although we know that it was his publicity-conscious wife who published the journals), he opened a Pandora's box of values concerning anthropological scholarship. Thus, reflexivity was born.

Malinowski's diary proved that the relationship between the author of cultural ethnographic monographs and the narrator of the personal journal had not been transparent, that at the very least he has been lying through his teeth while conjecturing his famous public image, putting his sincerity severely to the test. In fact, an analysis of the diary shows the erasure of subjectivity when the diary is compared with the monograph. The diary speaks of Malinowski's relationship with his Slavic soul and past, with Poland (especially the city of Krakow) and his beloved mother. It contains elements on the private life of the author (his love for Elsie which

accounts for one third of the diary; his friendship with Stas; his erotic feelings for other women) as well as personalised feelings about white colonials and the tribe that he came to study: the *savages* and the *niggers* – signifiers which betray a culture-specific ethnocentrism.

Despite his incorrigible self-dramatisation, all these elements are silenced in the monograph, which is supposed to represent an official, serious, professional document. The introspection of the diary, the gaze (regard) onto oneself, manifests itself impossible to translate into the final *magnum opus* of the anthropologist. Malinowski's reflexivity challenged the conventional distinction between subjective and objective styles of writing. From this point on, it has become clear that *objectivity* is imbued in a subjective stance, which predetermines and dictates its ontological existence. Young observed that Malinowski did not in fact propose any theory that included the observer in its frame of reference, in spite of his admonitions to others (1979: 11).

## The looking glass metaphor

According to Ross, reflexivity presents 'a concern with images and representations, the fluid and constructed nature of meaning, and whether one can really get beyond representations to an ultimate signified or truth' (Ross 2004). The looking glass metaphor has been used in relation to reflexivity: one may view reflexivity as an *inversion* rather than a direct *reflection* of self, like in the magic world of Alice in Wonderland (Herzfeld 1987): reflexivity is multidimensional and takes multiple points of view. Reflexivity can be individual or collective, private or public, implicit or explicit, partial or total (Babcock 1980):

Reflexiveness does not leave the subject lost in its own concerns; it pulls one toward the Other and away from isolated attentiveness toward oneself. Reflexiveness requires subject and object, breaking the thrall of self-concern by its very drive towards self-knowledge and inevitably takes into account a surrounding world of events, people and places (Myerhoff & Ruby 1982: 5).

## Metatextualisation

In a much more popular jargon, reflexivity refers to self-critique, *metatextualisation*, *meta-narrative*. So, it is said, in that sense, post-structuralists engage in reflexivity with relation to a critique of modernism. It goes without saying that, all of 20<sup>th</sup> century theory has thus engaged in reflexive meanderings, questioning Reason (Modernity or Enlightenment), questioning Modernity (Postmodernism), questioning Gender (Feminism), questioning the status of the Subaltern (Postcolonialism), and so on. Reflexivity is the main feature linking all the revolutions of 20<sup>th</sup> century thought. Scientists, philosophers and social scientists have all been engaged in reflexive activities. Reflexivity is not a new fad, although the fragmentation of discourse in post-structural literature has been accompanied by increased probing on the part of researchers for new ways of conceptualising ontology.

Reflexivity entered anthropological discourse in the 1970s, where it 'was particularly associated with experimental attempts to undermine the realist conventions of mainstream productions by inserting films (or film production) within films, having literary characters address their readers, and so on' (Levi 2005: 2023).

## Reflexivity in artistic productions

Examples of reflexivity in artistic productions date back to the earliest fairy tales. I am basing my analysis on a list first made by Barbara Myerhoff & Ruby, but extending and modelling the information to meet my own reflexive turn, with my own unique interpretation. I feel that their examples are good cases in point to illustrate the issues involved in this discourse.

In the ancient story of *Sinbad*, we have an embedded story of Scheherazade's exploits: the frames of the story portray a reflexivity concerning the process of narration. In *Sinbad*, we have a story within a story: what Geertz calls a 'thick description' in anthropology. Here we refer to the famous winking episode. A person winking is engaged in an act of communication, whereas a surface reading of the act would claim a mere contraction of the eye. A thick description is needed to pierce a higher level of understanding, where meaning is constructed based on a full fledged interpretation. Winking in Geertz's sense is a sort of embedded narrative – endosymbiotic and reflexive, where one is involved in a search for meaning not truth.

Reflexivity can also refer to the masterpiece of Luigi Pirandello's famous play *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921), or Dziga Vertov's film *The Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), in which we experience witnessing a 'mise en abyme' of the subject under analysis. The French term 'mise en abyme' means, 'placing into infinity' or 'placing into the abyss'. The commonplace usage of this phrase is describing the visual experience of standing between two mirrors, seeing an infinite reproduction of one's image. In Pirandello's play, the actors seek a narrator for their plight to metatextualise their existence: the narrator stands outside a text that begs for an author – the image of the narrator is *dédoublée*, the narrator outside the texts reflects on the role of the author inside the text, his mirrored image.

In Vertov's film, he talks about cinema on its own terms, as the man with a movie camera who discusses his own profession, who engages in reflexivity about his distinct human condition and the meaning of thereof.

Another example of reflexivity is the example of Norman Rockwell, a popular artist, who creates an image of himself painting the Saturday Post cover on the magazine cover: the cover of the magazine shows him painting the cover through an *emboîtement* of sorts, in which the image is seized and transformed inside another image, to tell a different contingent story. Such examples of self-referential self-critiques through images within images are now a quite common practice in books, film and media.

It must be said parenthetically that reflexivity may be misunderstood for being conflated with self-centeredness in a 'degenerate [postmodern] society wallowing narcissistically in empty self-preoccupation' (Myerhoff & Ruby 1982: 7). The author's intentions may be seen not as reflexive but as rooted in conceit. The threat or the challenge is to look at art for art's sake, as a piece of art independent of the artist of who made it, generalised, as a product of a culture that dictates its balance and poise, without examining the individual psychological underpinnings that have produced these pieces of art or the study in question.

## Auto-ethnographies

In anthropological discourse, reflexivity is very much associated with the kind of experimental works that have come out of current anthropology: especially the rise of diary writing and the emergence of auto-ethnographies, in which the self is explored through a focal subjective lens in light of one's social history. Reflexivity in anthropology refers to how the studied 'object' of research reacts towards fieldwork, to mould new epistemological areas of research. In modern anthropology, the objects of research – the indigenous tribesman, the Mexican woman, the Balinese cook, the Polynesian boatman – are seen through the hall of mirrors of dialogue and self-reflection, and granted a (post-colonial and post-modern) *voice* within the text. We are no longer confronted with the text written by an anthropologist, as much as the discourse of a native person who dares to speak her own story within the story of the anthropologist. The revolutionary postcolonial article by Gayatri Spivak, the *Subaltern Can Speak* immediately comes to mind. So we need to then ask, is the story, the anthropologist's story, or is it a first-hand account? There have been cases of native people bringing lawsuits against anthropologists, for misusing and misinterpreting their information in the field. Reflexive works on the role of the discourse between the native and the ethnographer examine the changing relationship of both, and challenge the way the anthropologist has been seen as the only primordial author of his text. In anthropology we must look at the effect of the anthropologist looking at the native looking at the anthropologist. We must observe the changing view of the anthropologist, as the native changes to appeal to his vision and modifies his behaviour under the magnifying glass.

In other words, reflexivity refers to how personal an anthropological text really becomes. Personal history is not the only element which influences objectivity. The social interaction between the ethnographer and his subjects of study influences the way in which an ethnographic account is constructed. Participant observation is characterised by a 'stepping in and out of the context', a sort of distance between self vis-à-vis the subject of study. On one hand, you have to get 'native' and get into the groove of the research through participation. On the other hand, as is alluded to in Powdermaker's book *Stranger and Friend: The Way of the Anthropologist*, you need to distance yourself to observe, through observation (Powdermaker 1960: 19). It is critical that research be based on pragmatic and realist ontology; however, the personal element cannot be removed from the equation. It comes as added baggage with all the trouble that this signifier connotes.

## Geertz's Balinese cockfight

The example of this has been Geertz's famous Balinese cockfight: we first see the anthropologists looking at the Balinese, and the Balinese looking back at them; then a change occurs as the Balinese alter their attitudes toward the anthropologists, who in turn begin to see the Balinese differently (Geertz 1973: 412–53; Myerhoff & Ruby 1982: 19). To continue citing Myerhoff and Ruby, anthropologists use what Vertov refers to as the 'cinema eye' to reflect back on their fieldwork, to distinguish their gaze from non-implicative modes of perception in the field.

In the field the observer modifies himself: in doing his work, he is no longer simply someone who greets the elders at the edge of the village, but he ethno-looks, ethno-observes, ethno-thinks. And those he deals with are similarly modified in giving their confidence to this habitual foreign visitor they ethno-show, ethno-speak, ethno-think.

It is this permanent ethno-dialogue which appears to me to be one of the most interesting angles in the current progress of ethnography. Knowledge is no longer a stolen secret, devoured in the Western temples of knowledge; it is the result of an endless quest where ethnographers and those they study meet on a path which some of us now call shared anthropology (Rouch 1978: 104-18).

## Selective literature review

In anthropology, the key works on reflexivity included Dell Hymes's collection *Reinventing Anthropology* (1999) in the United States and Talal Asad's *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* (1973) in Britain. Very important for the study of anthropology has been Clifford Geertz's book on *The Anthropologist as Author* (1990), in which Geertz expounds a theory of self-analysis through the literary project in anthropological discourse. Geertz's theory advocates the power of the scientific imagination to measure the cogency of our explications in the face of contact with the lives of strangers. Geertz has said (1973: 16):

Anthropologists have not always been as aware as they might be of this fact: that although culture exists in the trading post, the hill fort, or the sheep run, anthropology exists in the book, the article, the lecture, the museum display or sometimes nowadays the film. To become aware of it is to realise that the line between mode of representation and substantive content is undrawable in the cultural analysis as it is in painting; and that fact in turn seems to threaten the objective status of anthropological knowledge by suggesting that its source is not social reality but scholarly artifice.

It does threaten us, but the threat is hollow. The claim to attention of an ethnographic account does not rest on its author's ability to capture primitive facts in faraway places and carry them home like a mask or a carving, but on the degree to which he is able to clarify what goes on in such places, to reduce the puzzlement – what manner of men are these? – to which unfamiliar acts emerging out of the unknown backgrounds naturally give rise. This raises some serious problems of verification, all right – or if verification is too strong, a word for so soft a science (I myself would prefer appraisal) of how you can tell a better account from a worse one. But that is precisely the virtue of it. If ethnography is thick description and ethnographers those who are doing the describing, the determining question for any given example of it, whether a field journal squib or a Malinowski-sized monograph, it is whether it sorts winks from twitches and real winks from mimicked ones. It is not against a body of uninterpreted data, radically thinned, but against the power of the scientific imagination to bring us into touch with the lives of strangers. It is not worth it, as Thoreau said, to go round the world to count cats in Zanzibar.

The 1986 collections, Michael Fisher and George Marcus's *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* and James Clifford and Marcus's *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, have created rhetorical theories for contemplating various reflexive

experimentation through dialogue, pastiche, and memoir. The study of reflexivity has been responsible for constructing the literary project which defined post-structural anthropology and which has been responsible for de-centring the author.

Another critical work on reflexivity is the work of Edward Said, *Orientalism*, in which the author expounds a theory of the Orient as the referential other, and distorted mirror of the self. As Said himself points out, ‘by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self, European and more broadly western culture gained in strength and identity’ (1979: 3).

Argyrou writes that by:

revealing what Others lack, that is, by creating an absence, the West made itself present as “presence” in the Heideggerian and Derridian sense of this term – as the Being of beings, the centre of the world, the source of all legitimate signification (2003: 27).

Okeley summarised the dilemma of Western subjectivity by claiming that: ‘The avowed aim of anthropology to study all of humanity is spoiled if it excludes the Western ‘I’ while relying mainly on the Western eye/gaze upon “others”’ (1966: 5).

When we speak of discourse, reflexivity refers to the constant questioning that the modern metanarratives (texts, films, cultural productions of metatextual poetics) have put themselves under, radical questioning and doubt, which in literary anthropology has been brought about by Lyotard’s *Condition postmoderne* – the dawn of post-structuralism and its postmodern times.

Geertz’s *The Anthropologist as Author* (1990) book parallels the emergence of the postmodern discourse in anthropology. Geertz turns towards a self-centred dialectical study of the ethnographic method, as the means towards understanding the relationships between self and discourse.

Bob Scholte writes that we cannot take this *Lebenswelt* for granted, that we have to engage in epistemological reflection which provides reflexive understanding, hermeneutic mediation, and philosophical critique (Scholte 1999: 431) if we have to admit that anthropological activity is partial, non-objective and culturally determined when viewed *in situ*. Scholte discusses subjectivity as the being the companion of the ‘fallacy of objectivity’ uncovered in recent anthropological scholarship. He emphasises that when we consciously adopt a scientific meta-language, we may irrevocably lose sight of the field’s dynamic and interactive reality. It is the objective of reflexive anthropology to address the *mouth talk*, *terminological escapism*, or just *jargon*, which as metalanguages can turn into dangerous and pedantic abstractions. A reflexive anthropology would be a dialectical position in which ‘analytical procedures and descriptive devices are chosen and determined by reflection on the nature of the encountered phenomena and on the nature of that encounter’ (Fabian 1971: 25). We must not be afraid of avoiding the hermeneutical circle (Ricoeur 1969); indeed, the question is not ‘how to avoid it, but ... how to get properly into it’ (Radnitzky 1968: 23).

## Conclusion

Reflexivity is close to a Nietzschean perspective consciousness in which all facts are interpretations and all points are seen as subjective. In practice, reflexivity has relied on anthropology's recognition that its writings have to take into account the political and epistemological forces that condition them. Reflexivity in anthropology refers to objectivity and neutrality in discourse. It was encouraged by the explosion of experimental writing in the 1980s. These works have questioned the epistemology that founded anthropology in the recognition of provincialism, historical specificity and the implications of Western epistemologies. Today, the majority of anthropological works ask why and from where their cultural productions came, in order to ameliorate the analysis of questions which have been silenced in the past. Reflexivity very much represents a literary aspect of anthropological writing, which inscribes ethnographic texts issued from the kind of fieldwork described through this article as part of the larger canon of global masterpieces. Anthropologists are not pure scientists. Their diaries, ethnographic novels, poems and monographs form a very important branch of literature akin to travel writing. Reflexivity is what defines this aspect of literariness in anthropological texts.

Finally it should be said that reflexivity borrows very much from the biographical turn in anthropology, based on the imperative of the subject and the concept of *Homunculus mundus* (world mirror). Reflexivity is constructed based on the psychological concept of catharsis and the autobiographical pact (Bourdieu). Its reliability is based on a reconstruction *après coup* of a distanced look, a normative exigence and translatable aspirations. It is based on an exaltation of the *faux-concret*, and a micromania enticed by anecdotes. The diachronical perspective is considered essential towards a *signum authenticum* and a higher concept of self. For if biography is not everything, everything is biography (Leon Edel). The same can be said of reflexivity. Reflexivity galvanises discourse precisely because it expresses the silence within us, the *indicible*. It responds to Sartre's notion of the 'original project'. While reflexivity brings us closer to the *cas limites* in our anthropological corpus, its extension can be seen in the cross-roads of projects, trajectories, paths, displacements, voyages and ambushes.

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## **POVZETEK**

Razprava o refleksiji v antropologiji ni nič novega. Namen tega članka je preučiti pomen refleksivnosti za hermenevitično ali konfesionalno antropologijo, ki je v družboslovju endemična že od objave dnevnikov Malinowskega in od pojava ponavljajoče se in trajne krize objektivnosti, ki preganja sodobno znanost. Ugotovili smo, da antropologija ni več enostranska, vase zagledana, objektivna znanost. Danes je antropologija interpretirana zaradi svoje subjektivnosti in mnogoterosti obrazov, ki ustvarjajo mozaični odraz antropologa in raziskovalca. Članek nima namena inovativen, saj še zdaleč ne izpolnjuje te naloge. Vseeno pa govori o skladnosti diskurza, ki izhaja iz spornih pripovedi o sebi. Odgovarja na tisto, čemur nekateri pravijo refleksivni obrat v antropologiji – o homologiji med odtujevanjem in literarno razlago, ki spodkopava fiktivnost (ali neresnico) antropološkega pisanja v smislu, da je vsaka refleksivna kritika sama po sebi avtonomna razlaga, ki zamegljuje meje med resničnim in navideznim (razumeti v latinščini pomeni nekakšno plastično modeliranje, samo-gradnjo). Refleksivnosti je vse: obrat v globino jaza, ki razgalja in hipoteza o gradnji pomena.

**KLJUČNE BESEDE:** antropologija, refleksivnost, terensko delo, Malinowski

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