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Intersubjectivity, deception and the ‘opacity of other minds’: Perspectives from Highland New Guinea and beyond



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ABSTRACT

How are we to understand the widely attested claim from around the world that one can never know the thoughts of another? Here I consider that question as it arises in the Ku Waru region of Highland Papua New Guinea. Drawing on evidence from three kinds of speech events, I show that the Opacity Doctrine there is less about the problem of knowing other minds than about the possibility that others might be hiding their intentions. In order to understand its consequences for everyday life, I argue for the importance of distinguishing among: (1) metapragmatic discourse about minds and intentions; (2) discourse pragmatics; and (3) the more inclusive realm of intercorporeal engagement in which 1 and 2 are grounded.

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1. Introduction

How and to what extent do societies differ with respect to the ways in which intersubjectivity and its manifestations are construed and enacted? One of the areas of apparent difference that has been much discussed in recent anthropological publications, including most of the articles in the present collection, concerns what [Robbins and Rumsey \(2008\)](#) have called the doctrine of the ‘opacity of other minds’ – the widely attested claim from various locales around the world that one can never really know what other people are thinking – and associated forms of practice that seem to show an adherence to this idea. In a previous publication ([Rumsey, 2008](#)), I discussed the forms that this idea takes among the Ku Waru people of highland Papua New Guinea (PNG). I showed that notwithstanding their espousal of it in some contexts, it is inconsistent with things they espouse and do in others. Here I build upon that discussion in two ways:

- (1) by considering the issue of mental opacity in relation to a wider range of evidence from everyday life among Ku Waru people, including the non-verbal dimensions of conversational interaction, in this case as seen in a video of a mother and her two children, and mental-state attribution by adults in Ku Waru public speech;
- (2) by considering Ku Waru people’s claims about mental opacity in relation to another cultural emphasis which I show to be very strong among them, on the possibility of deceit as an aspect of everyday life.

In conclusion I develop implications of my findings on both counts for the understanding of intersubjectivity, showing that a focus on deceit, while at one level congruent with a stance that one cannot discern the mental states of others, is at another level by no means incompatible with intense intersubjective engagement. In fact the successful practice of deceit

Abbreviations and symbols not included in the Leipzig Glossing Rules (available online at <http://www.eva.mpg.de/lingua/resources/glossing-rules.php>): CTV, continuative; HAB, habitual; HRT, hortative; IDF, indefinite; JUS, jussive; NF, non-final verb; NSG, non-singular; OPT, optative; Q, question; PPR, present progressive; RP, remote past.

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actually demands such engagement. As part of the background for that discussion, and for my consideration of what is culturally specific about Ku Waru understandings and practices of intersubjectivity, in the following section I first turn to a consideration of some aspects of what is most generically human about them.

2. Levels of intention discernment

As demonstrated in detail by developmental psychologists (e.g. Stern, 1985; Trevarthen and Aitken, 2001; Tomasello et al., 2005), typically-developing¹ humans are from an early age extraordinarily sensitive and attentive to the intentions that we discern in our fellow humans. It would seem from that research that such discernment belongs to what Duranti (2008: 491) has identified as a ‘foundational level’ of intersubjectivity that is cross-culturally universal. Since almost all of the empirical studies of the relevant phenomena been done within a very limited range of cultural settings, most of them western ones, before I open the discussion of Ku Waru claims about mental opacity which would seem to deny its possibility, I will first present evidence of the ubiquity of intention discernment in the course of everyday life among Ku Waru people as elsewhere.

As suggested above, one of the most interesting and solidly supported findings of late twentieth century developmental psychology is that the capacity to share and exchange intentions and perspectives is one that begins to develop very early in Western children and is in fact highly developed long before they learn to speak. Another finding is that many of the interactions in which that capacity develops are not just dyadic but triadic, involving joint attention to a third person or object outside of the immediate circuit of interaction between infant and other (Hobson, 2004; Tomasello et al. 2005).

These findings are fully borne out by Francesca Merlan’s and my observations of Ku Waru children and their caregivers. An example from our Ku Waru language-socialization study can be seen in Fig. 1, which shows a moment of interaction between 21-month-old Josephine and her 5-year-old brother Jerry. It is a still from a video that I shot in 1997, of the two children and their mother Bebi sitting around the central hearth in their house at Kailge, where most of our Ku Waru fieldwork has been based. The segment of the video that will be discussed here is available online at <https://www.dl.dropboxusercontent.com/u/66237921/Video%20for%20Rumsey%20L%26C%20paper.m4v> A transcript of that segment is included with this article in Appendix A.

In order to stoke the fire, Jerry is blowing on it through a section of PVC pipe, which he is holding in both hands. As can be seen in Fig. 1 and on the video, Josephine’s left arm is extended out towards the tube. Or, to describe what she is doing in more ordinary terms, Josephine is reaching for the tube. To describe it that way of course adds an element of intention: it attributes to Josephine an intention to grasp the tube and treats her extending of her arm towards it as an instrumental act that is preparatory to the intended act of grasping.

In the video the reader can see and hear what happens in the 31 s that follow the moment shown in the still (as transcribed in Appendix A). One can hear that as Josephine reaches out towards the tube, she makes whining sounds, sometimes repeating a short, semantically indeterminate² syllable [dɛ] with rising intonation. After a few seconds of this, at 5:21:17, Jerry releases the tube from his left hand and with his right hand begins to move it towards Josephine’s extended left hand. At 5:22:23, her hand makes contact with it. By 5:23:24, she has begun to pull it towards herself. By 5:24:06, Jerry has relinquished his right-hand grip on the tube and it has begun to fall out of Josephine’s left hand. At that point, her mother Bebi reaches across with her right hand, lifts the tube up and guides the end of it towards Josephine’s mouth. While doing so, she is saying *ekepu nu tepi popu to, popu to, popu to, i-d popu to* ‘Now you blow the fire. Blow! Blow! Blow into here!’³ While this is happening, beginning at about 5:28, Jerry shifts his gaze from the fire towards Josephine. At about 5:30, Josephine turns her gaze away from the end of the tube towards Jerry. At 5:31, their gazes meet and Jerry smiles. From about 5:39 to 5:41, with Josephine looking at him, Jerry puts his hand to his mouth and says *ilyi, i, i, i te* ‘This, this, this, this, do this’.

As in my opening description of the initial frame as shown in Fig. 1, my account in the above paragraph of what happens in the subsequent 16 s is full of attributions of intentions to all three participants. More to the point, it seems clear that all of the participants themselves attribute intentions to one another and display their own in ways that they intend to be discernible by others. Thus, baby Josephine in the initial frame not only reaches for the tube that Jerry is holding, she vocalizes with rising intonation in a way that seems intended to get his attention and focus it on her attempt to take the tube from him. Though he does not redirect his gaze away from the fire and towards her at that point, from the way he releases the grip of his left hand on the tube and moves it towards her, it is clear that he has understood her intention and complied with it. After Josephine has the tube in her hand, first Bebi and then Jerry clearly express an intention that she blow through it. Both of them do this with speech, using imperative verbs, and also by non-verbal indications of what they want her to do, Bebi by moving the end of the tube towards Josephine’s mouth while blowing with her own and Jerry by pointing to his own mouth with both hands.

I have offered this rather detailed account of a short stretch of interaction among Ku Waru people not in order to argue that there is anything special about the role that is played by intention-attribution in it, but on the contrary, to show that

¹ I include this qualifying phrase to take account of the quite different development of autistic children in this respect.

² By semantically indeterminate I mean that it is not lexically interpretable either by me or our Ku Waru language assistants, who have characterised it as either meaningless (*we ung* ‘nothing word’) or a word that only Josephine understood (*yunu-nga ung*, ‘her own word’).

³ Josephine at this time was at the one-word stage of language acquisition. While her intelligible utterances were few and far between at this stage, she is frequently addressed by others and sometimes shows herself capable of understanding utterances of more than one word. For example, at 6:09, Bebi says softly into Josephine’s ear *jeri pait to* ‘Hit Jerry’, after which Josephine immediately takes a swing at him.

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