

# Generative Anthropology and Triangulation Theory

**Edmond Wright**

[elw33@hermes.cam.ac.uk](mailto:elw33@hermes.cam.ac.uk)

The aim of this article is to take Eric Gans' theory of Generative Anthropology, especially as regards its proposal about the origin and nature of language (Gans, 1985, 1993, 2007, et al.), together with my own explorations, called Triangulation Theory (Wright, 2005, 2008, 2011), and to suggest what overlaps, intersections and divergences might be discerned between the two.

I begin with a quotation from Samuel Beckett's novel *Watt*:

Looking at a pot, for example, or thinking of a pot, at one of Mr. Knott's pots, it was in vain that Watt said, Pot, Pot. Well, perhaps not quite in vain, but very nearly. For it was not a pot, the more he looked, the more he reflected, the more he felt sure of that, that it was not a pot at all. It resembled a pot, but it was not a pot of which one could say, Pot, Pot, and be comforted. It was in vain that it answered, with unexceptionable adequacy, all the purposes, and performed all the offices, of a pot, it was not a pot. And it was thus this hairsbreadth departure from the nature of a true pot that so excruciated Watt. For if the approximation had been less close, then Watt would have been less anguished. For then he would not have said, This is a pot, and yet not a pot, no, but then he would have said, This is something of which I do not know the name. And Watt preferred on the whole having to do with things of which he did not know the name, though this too was painful to Watt, to having to do with things of which the known name, the proven name, was not the name, any more, for him. For he could always hope, of a thing of which he had never known the name, that he would learn the name, some day, and so be tranquillized. But he could not look forward to this in the case of a thing of which the true name had ceased, suddenly, or gradually, to be the true name for Watt. For the pot remained a pot, Watt felt sure of that, for everyone but Watt. For Watt alone it was not a pot, any more.

(Beckett, 1958, 88-89)

Ontological anguish of so fastidious a quality, we seem sure, is certainly not ours. Such a passage would seem to belong more to a Lewis Carroll pedagogue than a modern philosopher—one thinks of the Turtle teacher in *Alice in Wonderland* with his "Will you,

won't you, will you, won't you, will you, won't you. . . ?" Yet, if we consider the actual implications of the situation in which a single person uses a word in the common language, which brings with it the obvious fact that he or she must have a way peculiar to them of understanding the common word, then the word 'common' itself becomes questionable.

## **I *Stereoscopy real and metaphorical***

In an earlier *Anthropoetics* article (2008) I drew from Gregory Bateson (Bateson, 1978: 79-81) the metaphor of Stereoscopy to make clear the structure of a dialogic interchange in language between two speakers. Each person has their own understanding of the common word at issue in some new would-be-informative utterance, but it is this very difference that lies behind the impulse to communicate it to the other, who is presumed to miss some key criterion.

In the visual and acoustic stereoscopic sensations, it is the whole-field mismatch between the input from left and right sensory organs that enables the brain to create the *sensory* 'space' that gives such a spontaneous guide to a region of distribution in the real. We are hardly ever aware at the conscious level of the sensory differences: to take visual stereoscopy as an illustration, some philosophers of perception have claimed that, when by chance you see a finger as double, you are doing no more than 'seeing one finger twice' (Ryle, 1966, 107; Pitcher, 1971, 41), but, in fact the two images are not identical at the level of the actual sensations you are having. Not only are the degrees of focus and colour responses not purely identical, but the angle at which the finger is viewed is different.

The metaphor is an appropriate one, the reason being that two persons' perspectives cannot be the same since, firstly, the histories of their learning are peculiar to them, and secondly, their sensings equally so. It is precisely because the histories differ that one wishes to update the other, since it has apparently become plain to the speaker that some key criterion has not been perceived by the other, that it is not present in their memory. The criterial difference that one person makes plain to the other effects a change in their objectifying. This is the goad that Watt is feeling when alone, he does not see the pot as a pot 'any more'; in the mundane public acceptance of the name he now finds something amiss.

## **II *The assumption of singularity as a method of obtaining convergence***

As I made plain in the earlier article, the *number* of entities presumed to be perceived is not necessarily preserved through the transformation of the utterance. The singularity of any entity is thus not guaranteed by our seeming agreement; the very singleness of a thing or any entity, even that of the self, is a needful illusion that is not ontologically secure. This mutual pretence of convergence is required by our having together to assume a single element in our sense fields *in order to get a rough correlation of the selections we are*

*making*. When the match is close enough, which means when it answers, 'with unexceptionable adequacy, all the purposes, and' performs 'all the offices' of the thing we have 'identified', such as a pot, we deem that we have perceived 'the same thing' together.

Note that purposes, that is, desires and fears, our motivations, have a part to play in the mutual validation of the word's applicability—and, notoriously, those too are particular to the bodies involved. It is polite to neglect any lingering reservations we might have, as to point up the possibility of difference can look altogether too like distrust. However, once this provisional agreement, this mutual hypothesis of motivational harmony has been set up, the speaker at once alters it. He or she does this by providing a clue that transforms the hearer's understanding of the word in that present circumstance. To quote a dictum of mine here: 'It is by a PRETENCE of *complete* success that we *partially* capture the REAL' (Wright, 1978, 538). A form of trust between speaker and hearer is thus indispensable in the interchange, even if it be two enemies talking.

### **III Motivation as the *sine qua non***

It perhaps is plain now what the relevance of Beckett's fantasy is to our present concern. He has imagined Watt as hypersensitive to the differences that remain even when all seeming agreement about how a word 'refers', as we say, to some fuzzy region of the real has been mutually checked out. In view of the central place of motivation in this scenario, it is no surprise that Watt is 'anguished' by the minutiae of the disparity between his understanding of the word 'pot' and that of others in the language-game. Notice, too that he is 'tranquillized' when he is taught a new word, for then the agreement of him as student with whoever as teacher updates him appears to be a soothing one that has no obvious hint of conflict or consequent violence in it. No *obvious* hint, because the differences have not been banished, merely adjusted—'unexceptionable adequacy', yes, may have been reached for the time being, but not logical identity. Indeed, the pretence of logical singularity must be repeated all over again with the next stage of adjustment of word to world. This is why Watt cannot shake his suspicion that 'the pot' as an element of the real fails to live up to the supposedly ideal agreement embodied in the word: he couldn't say 'Pot, pot, and be comforted'; and why it was painful to him to find that 'the known name, the proven name' no longer had the safe meaning he had so far assumed—which is as much to say he had discovered a unexpected discrepancy in his 'approximation' and that of others. Is Gans's way of putting this 'an aborted gesture of appropriation'? (Gans, [gaintro.htm](#))

Here is another similarity between the two analyses. The fact that even the most mundane statement involves a putative clash of motivations makes it plain that it is mistaken to think of language as basically a matter of moving from true to false, with declarative—or as J. L. Austin would have said 'constative'—statements as the foundation of language. As Richard van Oort has persuasively argued (van Oort, 1997), it is better to regard language as fundamentally 'performative', to use another term from Austin, in that, in speaking, one

performs a speech act similar to the ‘naming of a ship’ (an example of Austin’s). It can be seen that, since the utterance is a method of altering someone’s motivations, one is undoubtedly performing an act. One can thus say that every declarative statement (Austin’s ‘constative’) is a *re-naming* of some portion of the real, and is therefore covertly a performative. The relation between the real and the word has, hopefully for each person concerned, been moved on—for those persons are *concerned*, as Watt is.

#### **IV To each an idiolect**

But we can now, temporarily, stand at a safe philosophical distance and accept that every time we use the word ‘pot’, we cannot ignore the fact that criteria in our ‘identification’ of this mundane object cannot wholly match those of our fellow-speakers. If I may make again a reference I have made before:

As George Steiner has cogently argued, we each speak an ‘idiolect’ of the ‘standard’ language; he adds, ‘[t]here are no facsimiles of sensibility, no twin psyches’ (Steiner, 1975: 170). It is not that we are speaking a ‘private language’ so berated by the Wittgensteinians of the last century: we are speaking a private version of the public language. Steiner likens it to a form of translation (*ibid.*: 47). (Wright, 2008)

As is argued in my 2005 book on narrative, perception and language, the Joke makes capital out of this variance of understanding across persons, especially because we are reliant on context to help us disambiguate; witness the removal of ‘a’ and ‘the’ from in front of ‘pot’ in the Beckett passage would suggest at first glance that cannabis (a slang term from Spanish *potaguaya*, an infusion of cannabis buds) was the topic of the passage.

Watt’s anguish reveals something else about the ‘teaching’ of a word, of the very nature of the Utterance. In such an act, to ask another to update his or her use of a word, is to alter their purposes, their pattern of motivation. You could say that it was, performatively, a warning. The implication is clear, that to do so we must at the least trust each other in this particular move in the language-game—for it is usual to trust a person who warns us—and, on top of that, we ask the hearer to join with one in an initial mutual hypothesis that we both mean the same by a word (as mentioned above, to obtain the rough overlap of our selections from the real to allow the proposed adjustment of it to go through). This constitutes an overlap with Eric Gans’s analysis of the origin of language: a difference in motivation is a potential source of conflict, and the entrance into the mutual hypothesis is a *deferral* of possible violence (Gans, 2008,2).

#### **V The Joke as a familiar exemplar of the paradigm**

We need the Joke example to make plain the structure of the originary moment, for a joke is a performance in little of its essential character. Peter Gilgen (1993) opened a review of Eric

Gans's *Originary Thinking* with a pun:

Eric Gans, whose recreational activities include distance running, has covered a lot of ground during the past decade.

The analysis of any joke can reveal ultimately (for there is often a range of variations) a simple structure.

(1) There will be an region of the real that is the focus of attention for the speaker. It will form the node about which interpretations will play. For the Hearer it may be either (a) a region he or she has paid no attention to at all, just a part of the unperceived chaos of sensing that the philosopher of perception calls the 'non-epistemic' (*no-knowing*), a sensing without perceiving. As a simple example, take your experience on waking in an unfamiliar room; you are looking at the room sideways, and for a moment you are quite unable to recognize anything you see (your field of vision may be doubled anyway, with one eye half-covered by the blanket). Or (b) it may be a feature in the sensory process that you have already fixed a percept upon, a memory-gestalt that has guided your actions up to now, and one you are now to have updated. In this case the ambiguous region (type *b*) is 'Eric Gans . . . has covered a lot of ground'; this is the sound-sequence over which rival interpretations will play. I call this *the Ambiguous Element*.

(2) There will be some apparently secure indication of the general context that is taken at first to be relevant in the interpretation of (1). In this case it is patently the context of the journal, in which academic activities are being carried on, in particular the work carried on by Eric Gans in the theory of the origin of language. I call this *the First Clue* (to a relevant context);

(3) Then there is another clue which sets (1) in another context and thus, if the clue be of type (a), induces the Hearer or Reader to project a percept where there was none before (put another way, enables the Hearer to pick out from his or her visual field some portion that had been so far ignored), and, alternatively, if the clue be of type (b), induces the Hearer to change an existing percept into another or others (the latter must be included since there is no given preservation of singularity across the transformation, as in the example given in the earlier article where the apparent sight of what was seen as one bird is transformed into 'two-and-a-bit leaves'). Here this clue is 'whose recreational activities include distance running'. The metaphorical meaning of (1) 'covered a lot of ground', namely, *has spent much time and effort over a wide range of research and made considerable progress* is changed to its literal meaning, *has run a considerable distance*. I call this clue *the Second Clue* (one that reveals another possibly relevant context). Many jokes are of this form, taking advantage of the latent ambiguity of tropes.

This triangular structure can be found in all jokes and stories (see Wright 2005, Chs 1 and 2, for a thorough investigation of the diverse forms it can present itself).

## VI *The transformation of the Hearer's understanding*

It is this that is found in the first utterance, at the origin of language. The joke works because it rouses a Watt-like 'anguish' which is dispelled (or not if the joke is black) by a return to a comforting, mundanely relevant context.

Since there is no need to multiply examples, let us briefly quote that given in the earlier article (Wright 2008). A female and a male of some early hunting group are together in the forest: the female

notices, as we would say, a stag hidden within a bush not far from them, the stag not yet having become aware of them (for her what we call the 'stag' may be non-linguistically, that is, wordlessly conceptualized only as *prey* or *food*, the 'bush' perhaps merely as *non-rigid obstacle*). Then she notices that her male companion does not realize that the animal is hidden there. She, having been as a child one who was fond of play of every kind (and we know well that animals have the capacity to play), now raises her hands to the sides of her head in the form of antlers. This is the necessary 'transparency,' the Second Clue, which is itself ambiguous, being at once merely open hands by her head and also a stag's antlers. She foregrounds her mimetic performance as clearly as she can, perhaps sniffing like a deer, mock-nibbling with her mouth, and twitching her nose to improve the suggestion. This is the sort of thing perhaps she often did as a child in play. She then looks in the direction of the deer. She cannot point with her hands for that would be a symbol before symbols had come into existence. If now the male anthropoid tumbles to what is being said, and especially if now they make the attack together and the stag brought down, the first linguistic communication has gone through with great success. As Gans correctly insists, there is no necessity that the first statement be phonic in character (Gans 1999, 7). An updating of one agent's mode of attention, and thus, his concept and percept, had been brought about by another agent employing a transparency in a situation where the 'speaker' was aware that the 'hearer' needed updating about a region of the real. We have to say that the female was certainly meaning that a familiar source of food was before them even before her male companion picked up the clue (even though she had no words for source of food, or even stag, only the concepts of them), so it is strictly possible to mean before a fully functioning language has come into existence.

This triangle is at the core of the first utterance of language. It is, as Gans puts it, 'a mimetic triangle', because the first move is for Speaker and Hearer to enter into the (strictly false) hypothesis that their understandings of the word that refers to the putatively single referent are identical. It is as if Speaker and Hearer *imitate* each other in their singling out from the real of the 'same' element. This is where their mutual trust—or, ethically better—*faith* can be said to show itself, firstly for the Speaker, in his or her belief that the forthcoming transformation will be to the Hearer's advantage, and secondly for the

Hearer to accept the same outcome.

## **VII Why faith and not blind trust is requisite**

It has to be an act of faith and not blind trust since even the most loving partner in dialogue cannot, as we say, 'in all good faith', know that the transformation that the utterance proposes will be to the Hearer's benefit. Nothing can guard against Hearer's and Speaker's understandings being subtly at odds *without either of them being aware of it*. This is where Watt's 'anguish' about the degree of 'approximation' can be shown to be well justified. One may feel that one has taken adequate account of the other's perspective in this 'joint attentional scene' (Tomasello, 2003, 25-8), but there is no security in this. Many a comedy and tragedy makes plain the anguish that can result from an understanding presumed to be perfectly in common turning out as a result of time's whirligigs to be unexpectedly irreconcilable. This is where it becomes only too plain that the shifts of words upon the world cannot be securely predicated, and that, for all those engaged in dialogue, not only is blind trust at its heart self-serving, but ontological surprises can enforce the choice of unpalatable sacrifice (see *King Lear* or *Oedipus Rex*). This can be said to be the 'mimetic crisis' that Gans speaks of (Gans 1995, 7).

It is worth here quoting a closer analysis of his of this originary moment:

Reduced to the mimetic triangle purged of all naturalistic elements, the originary hypothesis may be formulated as follows: the sign originates as the solution to the 'paradoxical state' or 'pragmatic paradox' engendered when the mimetic relation to the other mediator requires the impossible task of maintaining the latter as model while imitating his appropriative action toward a unique object. Put in geometric terms, the parallel lines of imitation must converge toward a single point. The mimetic model is both model and (potential) obstacle; it is the moment when this contradiction prevents action that the human linguistic sign appears. (Gans, 1997, 20)

We have to see the uniqueness of the object, 'the single point', as a figment of human imagination, for, if the two agents were in perfect agreement about the focus of their interest ('the impossible task'), *no utterance would be required*. It exists in their imaginations in its 'sacred' perfection as a timeless 'referent'. Yet the mutual projection of that illusory uniqueness is paradoxically needed so that the Speaker can correct the Hearer's take upon the region of the real from which each agent is making a different selection. What is further necessitated is that Speaker and Hearer share a measure of trust so that the correction (with its aura of rivalrous mismatch) can go through. But this trust is inadequate if it is a blind one, hiding the possible threat of subsequent disagreement over this 'unique object'.

Blind trust fakes certainty without realizing it. So determined not to face the fear, it regards

any suggestion that 'truth', 'the facts', 'sincerity', 'objectivity' and the rest are not certain as a symptom of unethical betrayal, a 'relativist' hoax performed by a double-dealer, who cannot be trusted in turn. But that kind of trust is a Dickensian 'great expectation', always open to subversion, and, as for Pip in the novel, a subversion that can always ambiguously undermine one's own interpretation. When cross purposes emerge unexpectedly, as they did for Pip, then the tragic confrontation may demand a sacrifice for which one is utterly unprepared. For Pip the tragic conflict reached inside his self as so far conceived, pitting love of Estella, the stellar symbol of his rise in social status, against his responsibility to the convict to whom he owes that rise.

By now perhaps one can see that partners in dialogue do indeed 'sacralize' the putative referent at its corner of the triangle in that this focus of their attention is held to as an ideal never to be instantiated, and one that draws them into a commitment of faith that will not be ignored without ethical consequences. Their 'rivalrous desires' are to be laid aside in this dramatic performance of a unity of motivations converging on a 'singular referent', one that they should know full well is a mutual hypothesis and not an ontological given. This makes the 'sacred centre' as human as the 'periphery'. After all it can be argued that the human came into existence with the first utterance, the first entrance into the fictive, the first projection of the impossible linguistic ideal. We *play* the imitation of the desire of the other, knowing all the time that it can never be achieved.

No wonder that Gans should be tempted to attach 'the name-of-God' to the word in this dramatic performance (Gans, [gaintro.htm](#)) for in 'singling' out a logically perfect referent, it is as if they have attained to one of the eternal namings within God's omniscience. 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God.' This performance is what Alfred Schutz, in wishing to identify the strength of the social bond in language, has called 'the Idealization of Reciprocity' (Schutz, 1962, 3-47), the acting out of an ideal harmonization of intentions guaranteed by its promise, not of eternal agreement, for we have seen how that is unattainable, but of willing acceptance of the possibility of unknown future sacrifice, when till then unknown 'rivalries' come to the surface.

To see this idealization as actually utopian, as pointing at a real heaven as the goal of all language, is to turn the performance into a real superstition. Sometimes it does look as if Gans, in a Hobbesian manner, privileges the sacralizing of the 'vertical' sign-centre over the 'horizontal', peripheral 'rivalrous desires', which are thought of as 'animal' (Gans, 2008, 3-4), but it must not be forgotten *that the ideal goal of the dramatic performance of 'a unique referent' is to enable a transformation of it to satisfy those very desires in their transformation*. It is easy to forget that it is the human body that is providing the dynamism of the whole process.

This is where Thomas Bertonneau moves too far in his suspicion of 'appetite' (Bertonneau, 2009); it is a mistake to think that the social must always take precedence over the



biological. In the theory of language there is no detaching the two. Poor old Watt was induced to opt out of the game by this oppression of the majority, when he had as much right as anyone else to adjust the definition of 'pot'.

### **IX 'The deferral of violence'**

This is the nature of the 'deferral of violence' essential to generative anthropology. The 'oscillation between object and word' (Gans, op. cit.) arises precisely because of this underlying mismatch which the act of faith must embrace. To quote Beckett again, 'But he could not look forward to this in the case of a thing of which the true name had ceased, suddenly, or gradually, to be the true name for Watt'—but the fact is that he does have to face up to this possibility when he speaks at all, both when he has either to accept another's meaning, or when he has to challenge that new meaning. A 'mimesis of the desire of the other' can never be achieved. The responsibility for deciding between these two outcomes is an ethical matter, contingent on the circumstances, which may issue in a paradoxical conflict, as Gans insists. It is not always possible to purge resentment in a pure catharsis.

### **X A dark conclusion**

This is a dark conclusion since it allows for tragic confrontations where to favour the goals of one side over another would amount to brain-washing. Is this the *mise en abyme* that Gans speaks of? (Gans, [gaintro.htm](#)). He says elsewhere that 'violence is never eliminated' (2008, 2), and this would explain why. It is no surprise that, rather than face up to what a genuine faith demands, some would rather call this argument 'relativist' or 'solipsist', yet it places the self and its identifications as inextricably involving the stance of the other.

Neither does a sacrificial martyrdom have a divine reward. At the most it may offer the fragile hope that one's example may work in the great social game after one's death, which is the only form of 'immortality' that one may have (Wright, 2011, 39). Where the 'departure' of Watt's understanding from that of the other is only 'hairsbreadth', a comic compromise can perhaps be effected. In the tragic case, we have to endure the stubbornness of the paradox, since there is no other way of playing the language-game.

## **Works Cited**

Austin, J. L. (1975 [1962]) *How to Do Things with Words*. 1962. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Harvard University Press

Beckett, Samuel (1958) *Watt*. Paris: The Olympia Press.

Bertonneau, Thomas F. (2009) 'Eric L. Gans on Language, Culture God, and the Market', *The Brussels Journal*, July 5th

Gans, Eric 'Introduction to Generative Anthropology' *Anthropoetics*,  
<http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/gaintro.htm>

Gans, Eric (1981) *The Origin of Language: A Formal Theory of Representation*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Gans, Eric (1985) *The End of Culture: Toward a Generative Anthropology*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Gans, Eric (1993) *Originary Thinking: Elements of Generative Anthropology*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Gans, Eric (1997) *Signs of Paradox: Irony, Resentment, and Other Mimetic Structures*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press

Gans, Eric (2007) *The Scenic Imagination: Originary Thinking from Hobbes to the Present Day*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Gilgen, Peter (1993) Review of *Originary Thinking*, Eric Gans, (Stanford University Press, 1993), *Stanford Humanities Review*, 4:2.

Oort, Richard van (1997) "Performative-Constatative Revisited: the Genetics of Austin's Theory of Speech Acts." *Anthropoetics* II/2, 1-14.

Pitcher, George (1971) *A Theory of Perception*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press

Ryle, Gilbert (1966) *The Concept of Mind*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books

Schutz, Alfred (1962) *Collected Papers, Vol. I: The Problem of Social Reality*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff

Wright, Edmond (1978) 'Sociology and the irony model', *Sociology*, **12** (1978), 523-43

Wright, Edmond (2005) *Narrative, Perception, Language, and Faith*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

Wright, Edmond, ed. (2008) *The Case for Qualia*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.

Wright, Edmond (2011) *Avatar-Philosophy (and -Religion) or FAITHEISM*. Plymouth, UK: Imprint Academic.