

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12910-7 - Speech and Reasoning in Everyday Life

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Excerpt

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Part I

I General introduction

The research in which we are currently engaged is designed to provide a better understanding of the nature and operation of social thought, and of language as used in everyday life.

This particular book has two aims: to deepen and extend the theoretical and conceptual tools developed in our earlier book, *Pensée sociale, langage en usage et logiques autres*,¹ and to provide empirical controls over these theoretical and conceptual foundations. The reason for the wide range of empirical data in this book is that we wanted every theoretical proposition to have an empirical basis. Three detailed concrete investigations enabled us to situate and define the nature and working of everyday thought and speech: these were

- (1) sociocentrism (the extent to which cognitive organisation is centred or decentred),
- (2) causality (how the ordinary person explains the social reality that confronts him or her every day), and,
- (3) perception of time.

These three themes were selected because there is a general recognition of them as revealing indicators of the practical operation of social thought and language.

Underlying our research are a number of central points which are here advanced as postulates.

Eleven postulates

First postulate: By the expression ‘thought and language *in use*’, we mean the analysis of social thought and language as they are actually used by everybody in the most direct circumstances of day-to-day living. Talking about thought and language in use thus contrasts these terms both with abstract, scientific and learned thought, and with language as a general, universal, theoretical system. This approach also means that thought and language have to be studied as activities in process, i.e. ceaselessly being constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed. Thought is thus seen as something used, active, and not as an abstraction.

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This approach can therefore be formulated as the question: how does the man in the street think and speak in response to the daily reality of his world?

Second postulate: In a sociological perspective such as ours *social* thought necessarily involves a *multiplicity* of forms of thought.

We know that patterns of thought and categorisation systems vary from one society or culture to another. Indeed this is the main subject of transcultural psychiatry, cognitive anthropology and scientific ethnology. The fundamental categories of human understanding – conceptions of time, space, causality and so on – may be totally different in different cultures.

What we are hoping to demonstrate is the way in which patterns and categories of thought – ways of knowing – can vary substantially within our own society according to *social group*.

Revealing *social variation* is one of sociology's basic concerns. Sociology shows us that nothing is general or universal: all social phenomena, whatever they may be, vary from one social group to another.

Third postulate: Different ways of knowing stem from *incommensurability*.

The demonstration that different groups in society perceive social reality differently is only a first step. There is also another sociological fact, which is that these various ways of knowing are not merely different. It is not that different social groups see the same reality in divergent ways, they do not see the same reality, even though they use the same words to talk about the 'same' thing. Their ways of knowing are incompatible and incommensurable. To give two examples:

- (a) A xenophobic individual (or group) does not perceive the same reality when they talk about foreigners as a non-xenophobic person does, even though they are both talking about the same foreigners, and both employ the word 'foreigner'.
- (b) An anti-feminist and a feminist do not perceive the same reality when they employ the word 'woman'.

In both instances, the ways of knowing, the patterns of knowledge, are incommensurable, not merely different.

Fourth postulate: Incommensurability is accompanied by *conflict*.

If individuals (and therefore the social groups of which they are a part) have incommensurable ways of knowing and yet nonetheless succeed in 'communicating' with each other, it is not enough to explain their interaction by saying that they are communicating or exchanging information on the basis of a system of mutual comprehension.

Their 'exchange of information' is more like conflict or confrontation. If there is interaction it will be conflictual interaction, and the conflict, the mutual incomprehension, will be what motivates the interaction.

At a more general level, interaction and conflict are not superadded to

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social reality, but are constitutive of it. 'Society', in fact, is made by and through conflict; and 'interactions' are *constitutive conflictual interactions*.

Societies are not constituted by juxtaposing definable social groups which exist independently of one another; they are not defined by their participants but by the *relations* between the participants, which are a function of the nature of the relations between social groups. But more than these relations it is the *tensions* arising from them which provide the motive force of the social dynamic.

The same is true of social thought. The different ways of knowing social reality which operate in a given society at a given moment have more to do with a system of mutual inter-incomprehension than with one of mutual inter-comprehension.

Of course conflict and war do not account for everything. We have emphasised the conflictual aspect because, all too often, sociologists make a formal acknowledgement of its role at the outset of their work, after which it rapidly becomes a mere abstraction.

Fifth postulate: Each mode of thought contains all the others, which are often so far transformed and absorbed by it that one of the most difficult problems is to determine the intrinsic specificity of a mode of thought, and that of the part each plays in all the others.

Just as no purely individual person exists, uninfluenced and unaffected by society, so there is no completely idiosyncratic social group or social thought. Only the process of scientific analysis and its heuristic potential can justify such conceptual divisions and delimitations. Yet these divisions are not entirely arbitrary. The subjects of social-scientific investigations are always constructs, not objective reality, but, paradoxically, it is the very process of construction that enables us to make progress in understanding, analysing and explaining social reality.

Sixth postulate: Alternative logics.

There are other pitfalls too which have to be avoided in studying everyday social thought. It cannot be understood by the same criteria as we use for learned thought, as that would entail analysing it in terms of its 'lack' rather than in relation to specific criteria of its own, and we would end up revealing its 'lack' of rationality, and its 'weaknesses' and 'omissions' in comparison with 'correct' (i.e. scientific) thought. By rejecting that approach we are acknowledging that everyday social thought has *its own logic* which still needs to be specifically defined. In a way, this is reminiscent of the old argument about rational thought and the savage mind, logical and pre-logical thinking, but this time with the terms transposed to our own society.

There is no such thing as less or more logical thought: every system of thought has its own logic and its own form of coherence. But these other forms of coherence, these *alternative logics*, are not widely recognised; their

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nature and the particular ways in which they function need to be better known.

At bottom, our work is concerned to take up the challenge posed by this paradoxical situation, in which the most commonplace, and thus most widespread, forms of social thought are either almost unrecognised or else misunderstood.

Because everyday thought functions in a different manner from learned thought, we are once again in an area of incommensurability, for two reasons:

- (1) there is an incommensurability between learned and everyday thought, and
- (2) there is an incommensurability within everyday social thought itself, between the ways of knowing current among the different social groups.

Seventh postulate: The attempt to grasp social phenomena at the level of everyday, practical reality means laying the emphasis on the *dynamic, processual, constructivist* and *interactive* aspects, all of which are diametrically opposed to a static, reified, compartmentalised approach to social reality.

Eighth postulate: The viewpoints of the *actors themselves*.

Our proposed approach thus supposes that the researcher try to discover the viewpoints of the *actors themselves*, which means employing empirical data which are as '*natural*' as possible, produced, that is, in real situations from everyday life.

The material needs to be as 'raw' as possible, and situations where individuals are asked to produce data *for the researcher* need to be avoided. Without wanting to deny the inevitable influence of the researcher's presence, or that of his own way of knowing reality, we must use all the epistemological and methodological means at our disposal to minimise it. Data produced independently of the presence of a researcher, in a normal, everyday context, come closest to this ideal, so it is not a coincidence that part of our empirical material is derived from spontaneously written letters to various daily papers which open their letters columns to anybody with a point of view to express.

Ninth postulate: Thought AND language; content AND form.

We want to look *simultaneously* at what the man in the street is thinking and how he says it, both at the content and the linguistic form through which a given content is conveyed. *How* does he think and say what he thinks and says?

The attention paid to linguistic form, to discursive materiality, explains the gradual integration into a sociological approach of elements learned from sociallinguistics and discourse analysis.

Tenth postulate: The ideas of *ordinary* people.

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There is a tendency in political and social discourse analysis to look particularly at the discourse of people in authority, leaders or 'specialists', rather than at what the man in the street, the people who make up the *base* of the population, have to say.²

We have deliberately chosen to look as closely as possible at the ways of thinking and speaking current at the base precisely because there is so little awareness of it in the social sciences.

General comment

The various groups and sub-groups of a society are designated by widely differing terms: 'base', 'specialists', 'the silent majority', etc., and it is important to emphasise how relative and arbitrary some of these terms are. The phrase 'the silent majority' is a good example of this, as what it in fact designates are ways of speaking which are excluded from the official arena of authorised and legitimated ways of speaking.

The reason these ways of thinking and speaking are 'silent' is because they do not possess the same authority as the specialists who are authorised to think, and thus to think for other people.

The fact that a specialist, an actor who is authorised to think and speak, may on occasion represent a group which has not been authorised to express its opinion with more success than they could have done it for themselves does not mean that he embodies the intrinsic specificity of that way of thinking or speaking. He re-presents it, that is, he changes it, reformulates it and translates it into the terms of the way of thinking and speaking current in the official, authorised, legitimated arena. This is why it is necessary to look for social thought and everyday language in the places where they are actually produced, rather than in their manifold reformulations.

In fact, the expressive and communicative potential of a given society is far broader than that of the official, authorised and legitimate area of expression. A whole multiplicity of ways of knowing, speaking and feeling social reality are, explicitly or implicitly, involved.

Specialists are by definition a minority, and therefore only to deal with the specialists' way(s) of thinking and speaking is to ignore the nature of the cognitive and linguistic functioning of the majority of the population.³ The reason for trying to find the most general and the most natural cognitive and linguistic situations, and the statements that they give rise to, is not nostalgia for some notional authenticity or original purity (nothing in the social realm is natural or original) but an attempt to comprehend the operation of society *as a whole*.

The dominant, authorised or correct way of thinking and speaking can never be representative of the operation of society as a whole, despite the fact that its impact far outweighs its numerically minoritarian nature as it serves

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as an authoritative point of reference even for people outside that minority. A minoritarian but dominant form – whether of thought, speech, behaviour, dress or whatever – gains its legitimacy and is used as a reference point precisely because the whole of society, or at least the great majority of society, adopts and interiorises the minority form.

A model becomes dominant when all groups adopt it as their authority, even those who, despite long, costly and fruitless attempts, do not manage to conform to it, and when these latter groups are, in addition, ashamed of their own ways of thinking and speaking, which of course still continue to exist. The ultimate point is reached when all the people in the ‘non-legitimated’ groups fall silent, and no longer dare to think or speak, or even to express their opinions (which of course they still have), because they think of themselves as ‘incompetent’ and voluntarily delegate that right to people whom the dominant, legitimated model leads them to regard as more competent (as in ‘Personally I don’t know, you’ll have to ask somebody who knows more about it’).

These asymmetrical social situations can create easily identifiable *tensions* at the psychological level. Where ways of speaking are concerned, this takes the form of what, in sociolinguistics, is known as overcorrection. Confronted with somebody from the legitimated social group, a person from a non-legitimated background will, almost automatically, try to adapt his speech to the other’s: this is the effect of legitimacy and authority. And in addition to this, he will feel uncomfortable because he is not speaking his own language. He will make ‘mistakes’, he will speak out of turn, or keep quiet when he should say something. He will not be able to find the right words or he will express himself awkwardly, because he is talking, trying to talk, or being forced to talk in a language which is not his. He will thus end up expressing himself in a language which is neither the legitimated one, nor his own. Whatever he does, thinks or says, he will eventually be regarded as not belonging to the group that controls the legitimated model and is able to impose it on other groups. The power of a legitimated model lies in the fact that it is self-imposed. If it is unable to impose itself on other groups it lacks the characteristics of a legitimated model.

Legitimation has to come from within, otherwise we have a contested dominant model which will be in conflict with other models claiming different sorts of legitimation. But this is not to say that the legitimate model is therefore static and reified. It is constantly being recreated and actualised just by being used. A legitimated model of behaviour which was no longer being used in everyday life would cease to be legitimated. No social behaviour is self-generating, and the mere fact of its continuation implies continual use, which may require considerable energy, the energy and activity needed to orient everyday social life in one direction, the legitimated direction. Ordinary social activity is fundamentally dynamic, and

does not develop randomly, its constant activity is constantly being directed.

There is another element which bears out this fundamentally dynamic aspect of social activity. One might think that, after a while, the non-legitimated groups would manage to use the legitimated model 'correctly'. But that model is evolving and changing all the time. It is not enough to imitate it, you have to master it, capture its essence, and be able to manipulate it, adapt it and introduce innovations. You need to be at ease with its dangers and, if need be, actually create dangerous situations to demonstrate how easily you can surmount them. You have to be so much at home with it that the practice of it becomes a kind of game for those who can use it, and an endlessly renewed obstacle to the rest. The owners and creators of legitimated models of behaviour always have at least a head start over those for whom mastering them represents a constant tension. Using the legitimate model strengthens both its legitimacy and the illegitimacy of other models. Although they are not so crude or visible as political and economic power, cognitive and linguistic practices are much more effective in reinforcing, extending and intensifying the relations of domination, which are just as much relations of separation, exclusion and segregation, and of legitimation and non-legitimation.⁴

The above account should not be taken to imply a purely reproductive, mechanical idea of society. It is only one of the dimensions of the whole social reality, even though some sociologists see in it the essence of all society, or at least its principal component.

Eleventh postulate: Society: neither simple reproduction, nor pure production.

The notion of a society composed of unilateral relations of domination is no more than a notion, or indeed a myth. *Practical* analysis of the thought and language in everyday use allows a less caricatured and mechanical view of society to emerge, a more dynamic and complex view. Simplification is a product of the work of social scientists rather than a true reflection of how society works.

If we look at the language of the social sciences we will see that this simplification process is implicit from the outset. One of the most glaring examples of it is the frequency with which social phenomena are described as 'irrational'. Every time a social phenomenon resists being reduced to some catch-all conceptual schema (so catch-all, in fact, that they never manage to throw any new light on anything), it seems very easily (or possibly very lazily) to be described in terms of irrationality. This sort of designation, clearly unverified, shows nothing more than that the phenomenon in question cannot be understood by the kind of rationality underlying this sort of analysis. It is much easier (and less risky) to dress up a phenomenon one does not understand as 'irrational' than to seek out the several different rationalities it is governed by. Every time we describe the workings of ordinary

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social thinking (as opposed to learned thinking) using adjectives such as 'irrational', 'illogical', 'deviant', 'incorrect' and so on, we are guilty of this kind of over-simplification and falsification.

What we hope to show is that the ways of knowing and reasoning current among ordinary people are neither 'irrational', nor 'illogical', nor 'incorrect', just dominated or non-legitimated. Ordinary people are not condemned to live their whole lives thinking badly or incorrectly, victims of domination, anxiety, tension, trauma and overcorrection.

To begin with, these forms of thought and language, with their specific and idiosyncratic qualities, do have an existence of their own, even though they are not so frequently encountered as the authorised, legitimated ways of thinking. The fact that they are less visible is directly related to their status as forms of thought which are excluded, rejected or unrecognised. They have less market value, less prestige, and bring fewer rewards than those ways of thinking which the legitimate authorities regard as worthy of being thought, but (so far as we are still able to see them) they do exist.

And, of course, legitimated thought is not expected to be completely homogeneous. Nothing is single, static and harmonised, even the authorised way of thinking. The latter is in fact the product of a continuous struggle between the different ways of thinking regarded as valid enough to compete for being THE way of thinking. The groups that are authorised to think are also in conflict. THE way of thinking will be the one which succeeds in imposing itself both on the groups that are, and on the ones that are not, authorised to speak and think in the official arena.

This conflict, it is true, forces the non-legitimated ways of thinking deeper into silence. But the unspoken is not non-existent. The unthought and the unspoken are in fact spoken and thought, only not in the arena where the authorised ways of thinking, and of thinking for other people, are established.

There is more than one kind of silence. It may be a sign of exclusion, or of resignation, or of suppressed rebellion. The last of these is merely the unspoken waiting for the right moment to speak, a moment which is bound sooner or later to come.⁵ If the moment is slow in coming it may sometimes be created by force. The unspoken is suddenly said, but not through the channels normally used for the legitimate circulation of authorised ways of thinking. The wider the gap between legitimated and other ways of thinking, the better chance (or the greater the danger, depending on how you see it) there is of the latter bursting into utterance with crude – sometimes even violent – force. Those previously without the authority to express their thoughts, seize that authority for themselves and give them loud, unofficial but very public voice.

Conflict which is normally limited to those ways of thought which command a degree of value in the authorised ways of thought market then spreads to all ways of thinking and rapidly becomes open and inclusive, a

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general symbolic war, at least as long as the symbolic confrontation does not spill over into action, or thinking and speaking turn into doing. Such instances are not merely theoretical: they occur in all societies, albeit at infrequent intervals.

Indeed, it is precisely this sort of situation that has provided us with our empirical material, a social and political situation in which ways of thinking about and imagining society which are not *officially* legitimated are *publicly* expressed. This is the situation which has developed in Switzerland since the 1960s in response to the significant proportion of immigrants in the workforce, a proportion which many of the population see as too large, and even as a threat. This section of the population does not share the official or specialist way of thinking about the phenomenon of immigration, in which the problem is seen as being competently and authoritatively dealt with. Discontent remained latent and unspoken, beneath the surface, for some years and then suddenly erupted into public consciousness. An underground, non-legitimated way of thinking about and imagining social and political reality suddenly found itself in confrontation with the authorised, official way of thinking about it. The unspoken began to be said.

This confrontation did not remain at the symbolic, verbal level, but extended to proposals for action, through the opportunities for changing the law that the Swiss political system provides in the form of *initiatives populaires*.⁶

This constitutional process enables groups with an unofficial, unauthorised way of seeing reality not only to reveal it openly but also to make the rest of the population, including the authorised groups, explain the way in which *they* understand social reality.⁷

Ten general comments

Although we regard the opinions expressed in connection with these attempts to limit the foreign population as *indicative* of the nature and operation of the ordinary social thought and everyday language of the middle and working classes, the present study is not concerned with the nature of xenophobia itself.⁸

The ten comments that follow are an attempt to allay objections which might be raised by readers unfamiliar with our earlier work.

(1) We are not in any way claiming that the middle and working classes are generally xenophobic. In fact, our empirical data show it to be an aberration: out of the 500 letters we made use of, most of which came from what we have termed the 'base' of the population, about half were in favour of these attempts and half opposed, and of the half that were in favour only one of the three groups was strictly speaking xenophobic.

(2) We do not postulate the existence of a single, generic man in the street.