

## THE PRESENT TENSE AGAIN

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THE use of the present tense in anthropology continues to receive critical attention. Taking issue with the work of both Fabian (1983) and Davis (1992), I should like to propose a way of understanding the use of the present tense in anthropology as part of the conventional dialogue found in all science.

### *Fabian's Thesis*

Fabian treats contemporary anthropology very much on its own, isolated from other sciences, and sees it as at a point of significant historical development. Working backwards from this position, he provides a historical account of anthropology (1983: 2-35), describing its origins in some evolutionary theories prevalent in Europe in previous centuries. These theories are said to have derived from the Judaeo-Christian tradition a tendency to regard 'far away' as 'long ago'. The effect of Fabian's historical approach is to create a chronological funnel, wider at the earlier end and narrower towards the present, ending (as far as he can see) blindly in the future. I think that Fabian's isolation of anthropology from the rest

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of contemporary social and natural science not only provides a misleading historical origin for anthropology but also has serious consequences for his argument.

Fabian states that the absence of an adequate consideration of time in structural-functionalism and structuralism is part of the continuing (and probably unalterable) inability of anthropologists to acknowledge that the people whom they study are (or were) living on the earth at the same time as them (what he calls 'coevalness'). In anthropology there is 'denial of coevalness. By that I mean a persistent and systematic tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropologists in a time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse' (ibid.: 31). So, 'American anthropology and French structuralism, each having developed ways to circumvent or preempt coevalness, are potential and actual contributors to ideologies apt to sustain the new, vast, anonymous, but terribly effective regimen of absentee colonialism' (ibid.: 69). To this he notes 'the colonial involvement of British anthropology has been well documented, which is one reason why it will be little discussed in these essays' (ibid.: 174-5). This means that British functionalism is not analysed in detail, a rather surprising omission in view of the many criticisms of functionalism's failure to deal with the passage of time. It is not, however, Fabian's contentious history of anthropology that I wish to consider here but his views on the present tense.

Nowadays, the denial of coevalness by 'allochronism' (ibid.: 32) means using the present tense to talk about things that clearly happened in the past, so removing the referents from 'the dialogic situation': 'the present tense is a signal identifying a discourse as an observer's language' (ibid.: 86). The distancing and diminishing effect of the present tense is made worse by the habit of anthropologists, in their ethnographic accounts, of putting the people studied into the third person ('they') while implicitly putting the reader ('the dialogic Other' of the scientific community) into the second person ('you'), further distancing their informants by making them objects of study: 'pronouns and verb forms in the third person mark an Other outside the dialogue' (ibid.: 85).

Fabian then (ibid.: 105-41) describes the emphasis in science, including anthropology, on sight. He stresses the predominantly visual nature of scientific data and the importance attached to observations, and he approves pleas for more value to be attached to hearing and speaking. I mention this part of Fabian's thesis because I think that his own stress on the visual aspects of science may have diverted his attention from the pre-eminence of the heard and the spoken in scientific activity. Further, though these visual metaphors are partly due to the convention that scientific evidence should be communally observable, there is another aspect to their use that he has overlooked because of the errors of his main thesis about the present tense.

These errors are as follows. The present tense in anthropology, rather than separating anthropologists and the people they study, in fact brings them together—the use of past tenses is much more likely to cause such separation. The use of the third person, rather than excluding other people from the dialogue, in fact allows them entry to it. Removal of other people from the dialogue is,

therefore, not effected by either of the methods Fabian describes, but by either or both of two other methods: by using past tenses or by denying them personal qualities (principally either by denying them subjectivity or by interfering with their independence as participants in the dialogue).

As a preliminary to elaborating these assertions, I now summarize the way Davis (1992) has categorized the uses of the present tense in anthropology, as I find some instructive omissions in his account.

### *Davis's Account*

Davis's account of the way that present and past tenses are used in anthropology is practical and realistic. He lists the ways he has found the present tense being used, using empirical examples from anthropological literature to illustrate, though not to derive, these categories. He then comments on some lack of clarity that may arise from the use of the present tense and suggests that past tenses might with benefit be used more often.

His discussion of the uses of the present tense is prefaced by the statement, 'in English we have at our disposal a repertoire of eight uses of the present tense', and then, apparently as straightforward amplification of this assertion, 'people write eight kinds of thing exclusively in the present tense' (Davis 1992: 206). He lists eight kinds of thing, grouped into three categories. The first three are participatory, as in synopses, liturgies and stage directions; the next two are observational, as in describing pictures, photographs and maps (with anthropological analogies); the last two are scientific, as in statements that are true by definition or that have been demonstrated to be true by induction and experience.

The three kinds of thing described in the participatory category are exemplified by extracts from operatic, religious and dramatic writings. In these formal, non-scientific enterprises, actions have a relatively fixed procedure and words spoken or sung are pre-ordained. Despite being put in the participatory category, such performed and spoken activities can only be partially or alternately participated in by the readers of these accounts (as audience, congregation or actors). Where liturgies and stage directions (two examples in this category) are followed, speakers and actors do not say what they as free agents think or do at the time but rather what they think or do as actors following a script. Synopses, the third example in this category, are provided by one knowledgeable observer for other observers, whose participation is dependent on their observation of actors, who are themselves constrained by a script. Synopses, in fact, quite apart from their directive educational force, represent a further shift away from unrestrained participation.

In the observational group, the things that are described in the present (pictures, photographs and maps) are all artefacts, explicitly permanent and continuous and available to anyone else present. Although for Davis case-histories

and significant incidents in ethnographic research are analogous in some way to photographs, it is clear that the things in this category that are discussed in the present tense are separate in both space and matter, though not in time, from the person discussing them. Given that the uses of the observational present that he describes seem therefore to relate to quite specific objects or analogous situations, it is confusing when he later states that 'we conventionally generalise in an "observational" present' (1992: 211). It would in fact seem more consistent (and hence logical) to put generalizations in the third, scientific group, along with laws and tautologies. But I do not think that calling this last category scientific is accurate. I shall propose that science depends on argument, and there is obviously little question of either laws or tautologies being the subject of disagreement and hence argument.

Unless I have very much mistaken what Davis means by his categories, I think there are five other important ways in which the present tense is used in anthropological writing and which, indeed, (with one exception) he has used in his article. Even if I have misunderstood him, I think it is worth drawing attention to these ways in which the present tense is used. My examples are taken from anthropological literature.

#### *Other Uses of the Present Tense in Anthropology*

Type 1. The present tense is used for reporting publicly observable data.

- 1a. These [spondylus shells] are freely, though by no means easily, accessible in the coral outcrops of the Sanaroa Lagoon. It is from this shell that the small circular perforated discs (*kaloma*) are made, out of which the necklaces of the Kula are composed, and which also serve for ornamenting almost all the articles of value or of artistic finish which are used within the Kula district. (Malinowski 1922: 367)
- 1b. The Andamanese belong to that branch of the human species known to anthropologists as the Negrito race. They are short of stature with black skins and frizzy hair. The Nicobarese, on the other hand, resemble the races of Indo-China and Malaya, and have brown skins and lank hair, and are of medium stature. (Radcliffe-Brown 1922: 2)
- 1c. So Bushmen survive in the most rigorous places; they survive in the dense, mosquito-ridden papyrus swamps of the Okovango River, steaming like a jungle and dangerous with snakes and fever, where the River Bushmen live, the only Bushmen with plenty of water; they also survive on the vast, rolling steppes of central Bechuanaland, the territory of the Gikwe Bushmen, who for the nine dry months of the year have no water at all and do without it. (Thomas 1959: 26).

- 1d. The Gypsies or Travellers are dependent on a wider economy within which they circulate supplying goods, services and occasional labour. Unlike migrant workers moving from a single locality to another for 'settled' and wage-labour jobs, Gypsies operate largely independently of wage-labour. (Okely 1983: 49)
- 1e. Anthropologists do not write exclusively in the present tenses. (Davis 1992: 209)

These excerpts show the use of the present tense for describing objective factual data, available to anyone else present. There is obviously a range of factual objectivity in these extracts—the statements in 1a are not controvertible in the way those in 1d might be; especially with the passage of time, the situation may change, as implied in the statements in 1c. But, at the time of observation (and, by convention, also of writing) these certainly were facts, permanent and objective, as permanent and objective as any facts described in similar statements in natural science.<sup>1</sup> There may, of course, be changes not only in the factual circumstances described, but also in the manner of description, or the categories used—the racial categories in 1b were important at the time of writing.

Type 2. The present tense is used for making observations into public spoken statements.

- 2a. 'Poverty', I was repeatedly told, 'resides in the anus of the Brahman'. (Parry 1985: 621)
- 2b. *Adalo*, like the living, crave pork. (Keesing 1982: 128)
- 2c. Sharing rights for pregnant women are particularly emphasised by the Hadza: they have the right to ask anyone for food at any time and are believed to be at risk if they are refused. (Woodburn 1982: 442)
- 2d. There are those, like André, who really believe that the pygmies are inferior and are meant to be treated like slaves, but for the most part the villagers are much more sensible and realistic. (Turnbull 1961: 161)

The first of these excerpts is an example of reporting speech directly. The others show how speech is indirectly reported: they are examples of writing in the present tense what people have said in the present tense about what they believed or thought, at the time they spoke, which is in the past. Such beliefs and thoughts

1. See for example Egan *et al.* 1992: 522: 'The human immunodeficiency virus-1 (HIV) is neurotrophic and enters the nervous system soon after initial infection. One long-term consequence of this brain penetration is the development of progressive impairment of cognitive and motor function due to a direct effect of the virus on neurons.'

expressed in speech are not themselves publicly observable (unlike the facts that Type 1 statements are concerned with) although the speech is itself publicly observable, and may be about publicly observable things or events and may have publicly observable consequences.

Here the present tense is the tense in which the original statements were made. The author has heard the statement, translated it (and transformed it in other ways) and written it in the same tense as that in which it was spoken. The speakers may be unnamed (as in 2a), only implicitly named (as in 2b), generically named (as in 2c) or individually named (as in 2d). This lack of consistent attribution may lead to confusion with other types of statement made in the present tense, particularly those of Types 1 and 5, where originators of statements are usually not explicitly named.

Because the preparatory work for their studies did not involve much listening to other people talking, neither Davis nor Fabian uses the present tense in this way; for the same reason, nor do I.

Type 3. The present tense is used for reporting writing.

- 3a. As Lienhardt says, the action of *thuic* is relatively trivial, yet 'the principle involved...is similar to that which obtains in symbolic action in situations which, by their very nature, preclude the possibility of technical or practical action as a complete alternative (*ibid.*)'. (Ortner 1978: 6)
- 3b. Whatever else it may also be, sacrifice can be regarded, as Socrates says in the *Euthyphro*, as being in a sense a 'commercial technique', a way of doing business between gods and men. (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 224)
- 3c. In his discussion of Mauss's *fait total social*, Lévi-Strauss (1950, pp. xxiv-xxx) gives a special place to social anthropology within the social sciences, by virtue of the otherness and strangeness of the societies studied. (Lewis 1980: 218)
- 3d. Maxwell Owusu, in an essay 'Ethnography in Africa' (1978), argues, on the basis of writings considered exemplary, that almost all the 'classical' ethnographers failed to meet one basic condition: command of the language of the peoples they studied. (Fabian 1983: 32)
- 3e. Rosaldo, for instance, argues that even though Evans-Pritchard's account of how he did his fieldwork reads a bit bleakly, that is a characteristically British style—'tongue-in-cheek understatement', perhaps even a deliberate attempt to exaggerate the overwhelmingness of the odds against producing such a fine book (Rosaldo, 1986: 89). (Davis 1992: 209)

In 3a, as in 2a, the writer is quoting directly, but this time from another writer and not a speaker, despite her use of the word 'says'. Before quoting Lienhardt,

she introduces him in the present tense, as I introduce her in the present tense. In 3c, 3d and 3e the writers are reporting what other writers have written in the present tense, in a way identical to the indirect reporting of speech described in Type 2 above. The use of the present tense is combined with an acknowledgement of the past nature of the event of writing by the inclusion of dates (see 3c, 3d and 3e). Like Ortner, the authors of 3d and 3e are referring not to other speakers but to other writers, even though they are reported as speaking and arguing. Conversely, in 3b 'as Socrates says' could be expanded to 'as Plato says (or writes) Socrates says', because what Socrates said was recorded in writing by Plato in the *Dialogues*. In my terminology, Evans-Pritchard has conflated Types 2 and 3, preferring Type 2.

Type 4. The present tense is used for stating the writer's personal position (views, beliefs, feelings), as distinct from the writer's theories.

- 4a. I am personally rather tolerant of disorder. (Douglas 1966: 2)
- 4b. My two fears are distortion and inaccuracy, or rather the kind of inaccuracy produced by too dogmatic a generality and too positivistic a localized focus. (Said 1991: 8)
- 4c. I am divulging here practices and theories that the Baruya have striven fiercely to keep secret, prudently, obstinately concealing them from the whites, whose contempt and aggressiveness they fear more than anything else. (Godelier 1986: 51)
- 4d. In the end, I cannot accept what I appear to be granting now: that anthropology could ever legitimately or even just factually circumvent or preempt the challenges of coevalness. (Fabian 1983: 38)
- 4e. I should say that I think I understand Evans-Pritchard's reasons for using the present tense so generally in the Nuer [*sic*]. (Davis 1992: 212)

There is obviously no equivalent of 2a and 3a here, because there is no need for writers to put an account of their own position at the time of writing in reported direct speech in the present tense. It is confusing and unnecessary to write, for example, 'I believe that "I believe that..."', so the excerpts here demonstrate the simple use of the first person in the present tense. The purpose of this use of the present tense is to be self-explanatory, to help the reader understand the writer and the writer's position, which may make the statements in the writer's theories (Type 5 statements) more understandable too. This aim is not always realized.

Type 5. Lastly, the present tense is used for making assertions of varying generality or, in other words, stating theories. These assertions are not statements of objective fact (Type 1), nor of what others have said (Type 2) or written (Type 3), nor of the writer's own personal position (Type 4). Based on all these other sorts of statement in the present tense, they are rather new conclusions, which can then themselves be argued about.

- 5a. The close relationship between parent and child, which has such a decisive influence upon so many in our civilization that submission to the parent or defiance of the parent may become the dominating pattern of a lifetime, is not found in Samoa. (Mead 1943: 168)
- 5b. However, the obstinate fidelity to a past conceived as a timeless model, rather than a stage in the historical process, betrays no moral or intellectual deficiency whatsoever. It expresses a consciously or unconsciously adopted attitude, the systematic nature of which is attested all over the world by that endlessly repeated justification of every technique, rule, and custom in the single argument: the ancestors taught it to us. (Lévi-Strauss 1972: 236)
- 5c. Though post-modern ethnography privileges discourse, it does not locate itself exclusively within the problematics of a single tradition of discourse, and seeks, in particular, to avoid grounding itself in the theoretical and commonsense categories of the hegemonic Western tradition. (Stephen A. Tyler 1986: 129)
- 5d. Enlightenment thought marks a break with an essentially medieval, Christian (or Judeo-Christian) vision of Time. (Fabian 1983: 26)
- 5e. The case for writing abstraction in the present tense is also a strong one. (Davis 1992: 215)

The present tense is used here in a way that is similarly assertive but less law-like than that which Davis describes in his scientific category. These statements are assertions, of a general or specific nature, which have been or will be justified; they are the writer's theories, not the writer's views (which are Type 4). Unlike views, theories are not simply an expression of the writer's position and can therefore (unlike views) be detached from the writer for the purposes of free discussion and argument.

There is obviously a danger that statements of Type 5 may be confused with other sorts of statements made in the present tense, particularly with Type 1 objective statements. Something of this potential confusion may be seen by considering the excerpts above, taken out of context as they are. For example, 5a might be confused with a Type 1 statement, and 5b with a Type 4 statement. The fact that a writer's views (Type 4) and theories (Type 5) both become Type 3 when reported may be a further source of confusion. For clarity in later discussion, I shall call the method of reporting someone else's views Type 4 in



Type 3, and someone else's theories simply Type 3. Given this potential confusion, every writer's job is to be clear about the status, origins and authority of everything that he or she writes. Readers may then disagree with either the form or the content of the assertion or its justification.

### *The Basic Dialogue of Types 3, 4 and 5*

Fabian's contention that the use of the third person marks 'an Other' outside the dialogue implies that dialogue can only take place between two people, which is wrong both etymologically and in practice. Although originally dialogue meant a spoken discussion between two or more people, one person alone can conduct an internal mental dialogue. Discussion and argument, either external or internal, is the basis of science.

I have described above the use of the present tense in three related ways (Type 3, to report other writers; Type 4, to provide an account of the writer's own position; and Type 5, to make assertions that can be argued with) and now suggest that these three uses provide the basic form of the written dialogue. The writer (as Fabian describes) is in the first person ('I'), the reader is implicitly in the second person ('you') and other writers are in the third person singular or plural ('he', 'she', 'they'). The present tense in such dialogue then has precisely the opposite effect to that which Fabian says it does: placing everyone who might have something to contribute to the dialogue in the present tense unites them (that is, the writer, other writers and the reader) in time and place (that is, in the reader's present and the reader's person). By the use of the present tense, the reader is enabled to take part in this conventionally created mental dialogue in the reader's real subjective time. While the immediate exchange is between the writer and reader, placing other writers in the third person does not bar them from the dialogue but enables them to be heard.

### *Removal from the Dialogue by Objectification*

In natural science (which Fabian and Davis hardly mention), dialogue may be conducted about Type 1 statements in the present, dealing with the publicly observable permanence of nature, or (as in history) about such statements in past tenses, which might deal, for example, with accounts of either the present writer's or other people's actions and observations. But whether in past or present, there is no question of inarticulate nature joining in the dialogue. In human sciences, the people studied may or may not be involved in the dialogue, depending both on

the nature of the question and the writer discussing it. The question of the measured height of a group of people, for example, is determined by using only publicly observable methods; to answer it, there is no need to listen to the group's views on this or any other matter.<sup>2</sup> But where the actions of a group of people are concerned, the writer may either continue to act simply as an observer (and write Type 1 statements) or may listen to statements about what they are doing and report them (as Type 2). The writer may then treat their statements in two ways, either as objective data (again, Type 1), or as personal views or theories (Type 4 in Type 3, or Type 3). In the first case, with other people's statements treated as objective data, argument is about what they say (with them excluded from the argument); in the second two cases, argument may still be about them but they now have a voice in the argument.

Placing informants in the third person and what they say in the present tense does not, then, automatically include them in the dialogue. It is whether or not they are treated as having views or theories that determines inclusion and on what terms. Full inclusion is only granted if informants are considered to have theories, which can be argued with, as well as views, beliefs or feelings, which cannot.

A different way (not too whimsical, I hope) of considering these different roles in the dialogue of those present in the third person, provided they are allowed a voice, is based on the roles of the various participants in an English trial. Here the jury (readers) are addressed, as 'you', by a barrister (the writer), whose Type 5 conclusions they judge. The barrister uses the third person to refer to other counsel and their arguments (in Type 3 statements) and to witnesses and their subjective evidence (in Type 4 in Type 3 statements). But if people are not granted a voice in such a trial (i.e. if their Type 2 statements are treated as Type 1 data), the effect is quite different. In this case, the informants (that is, other people) cannot give evidence or argue about it, or judge the argument; they themselves and their statements now actually constitute the evidence exhibited, objective and inanimate.

2. For an example of some human scientists' account of their actions, see Takei *et al.* 1992: 506: 'We sought Mental Health Enquiry data on all first-admission patients discharged from psychiatric hospitals in England and Wales between 1976 and 1986 who received an ICD-8 or ICD-9 diagnosis of either affective or schizophrenic psychosis.' Such accounts are, interestingly, often put in the passive voice: 'An intravenous cannula was inserted into a forearm vein and sealed with a rubber bung. The cannula was kept patent by flushing it with Heprinse (0.5 ml, 50 units heparin) after samples of blood were taken and the first 2 ml extracted at each time point was discarded...Prolactin levels were measured by fluoroimmunoassay (LKB method) as described by Lovgren *et al.* (1985)' (Lucey *et al.* 1992: 518).

For an example of such an account given of other human scientists' actions and observations, see Tyler *et al.* 1992: 481: 'In 1983, close linkage was found between Huntington's disease (HD) and a DNA marker (G8, locus D4S10) in two large kindreds, one from USA, the other from Venezuela (Gusella *et al.*, 1983). The linkage was confirmed by studies in the UK (Harper, 1986) and numerous other countries; data pooled from a total of 70 families showed no evidence for more than one locus for HD (Conneally *et al.*, 1989).'

*Removal from the Dialogue by Denying Autonomy*

Such denial of personal subjectivity by objectification is, therefore, one method of removing other people from the dialogue. Another method of removal by denying personal qualities is by interfering with the autonomy of the notional persons involved in the dialogue. For example, the reader (previously in the second person, 'you') can be removed from the dialogue with the writer ('I') by the latter's use of the first person plural ('we', 'us', 'our'), which forcibly associates the otherwise distinct reader with the writer. This conscription makes it more difficult for the reader to dissociate from, in order to argue with, the writer. Fabian is quite fond of this device, using it, for example, four times on one page (1983: 88). He also favours the use of the impersonal 'one' (e.g. *ibid.*: 78), an anonymous third person singular that is neither 'he' nor 'she', and so has a similar effect in preventing dialogue. Explicit identification of the reader as 'you' may also interfere with the reader's own participation in the dialogue; to the extent that the reader could be anyone, ascription of a particularity (an opinion or a question, for example) denies the reader's anonymous generality. This device is often used to set up arguments that the writer then easily disposes of (the 'Aunt Sally' or 'straw man' ploy).

To the extent that any academic argument in the present tense is with identifiable individuals rather than with groups of people, Fabian is right about the distancing effect of the use of the third person, but only in the plural. The ethnographic use of collective nouns, which may have an objectifying aspect, also limits argument, only permitting it on the assumption of the homogeneity of the group. Fabian frequently uses 'anthropology' as such an objective collective noun, using it five times in this way on one page (*ibid.*: 143).

These uses of 'we', 'one', 'you', 'they' and 'it' are all examples of rhetoric, which uses language itself, rather than argument, to convince and persuade.

*The Errors in Fabian's Thesis*

I contend, then, that Fabian's thesis about the present tense and the third person in anthropology is wrong. These linguistic forms, rather than distancing other people, are the conventional way of bringing together people who have, or have had, things to say and write on the subject under discussion. Fabian's stress on the unbalanced preponderance of visual accounts in anthropology and his wish to promote the heard and spoken is consequently misplaced—the implicit stress in anthropological texts is already on the heard and the spoken of conventional scientific dialogue, into which is incorporated what has been written and seen (and touched and smelt), as well as what has been heard. Indeed, in anthropology of all sciences the privilege given to verbal communication, both spoken and written,

can much more easily be criticized than further encouraged. The use of visual metaphors in texts is no doubt partly demonstrative, as Fabian describes, but is also partly related to the fact that anthropological accounts, like other scientific accounts, are written and therefore read and that reading is dependent upon visual activity; the written dialogue is read and then transformed by the reader into the crucial internal dialogue.

The important point arising from this discussion is that these conventional conversational uses of the present tense (which include, confusedly, somewhere among them 'the ethnographic present') are not just found in anthropology but in all Western scientific enquiries, past and present (a point that I suppose Fabian misses because of his singular historical approach). I shall call this tradition 'the convention of academic scientific enquiry' for the following reasons: 'academic' describes its origin in Plato's Academy; 'scientific' means that it makes knowledge; and 'enquiry' describes the general process of approaching, rather than claiming, truth.

This man-made convention of scientific dialogue is one way round a practical problem that Fabian almost acknowledges right at the end of his book, when he states that the denial of coevalness ultimately 'rests on the negation of the temporal materiality of communication through language' (1983: 164), a real temporal materiality that means that even when we—I use the first person plural because I do not think there can be any argument—talk to one another in the so-called here and now, we cannot enter into precisely simultaneous exchanges of talking and listening. We talk in response to what someone else has said, which, however recently, is definitely in the past; but, for the purposes of communication, we assume that they still hold in their mind what they have just expressed in speech.

#### *An Error in my Contention So Far*

So far I have talked about the present tense as the only tense in which conventional academic scientific dialogue is conducted. As, however, a brief consideration of this sentence will reveal, some modification of this assertion is needed. Although the present tense enables listeners and readers to join the dialogue by aligning their own subjective present with the present tense of the dialogue, this subjective present has past and future, as well as present, aspects. Linguistically, these may be called 'primary' tenses in English, as they are in Latin and Greek. In the first two sentences of this paragraph I have used three primary tenses, the perfect tense ('so far I have talked about') and the future tense ('as a brief consideration of this sentence will reveal'), as well as the present tense ('is conducted', 'is needed'). For the remainder of this essay, I shall use the division of tenses into 'primary' and 'historic', where historic refers to all past tenses (e.g.

imperfect, 'I was talking'; simple past, 'I talked'; and pluperfect, 'I had talked') except the primary past tenses, the most common of which is the perfect.<sup>3</sup>

### *The Use of Historic Tenses in Anthropology*

Fabian's approval of practical and realistic methods of enquiry involves insisting on the accurate recording of linear time, on affirming coevalness and denying allochronicity. Given the real practical problem of temporal materiality, any such insistence in speech could only prevent spoken communication between people, and in writing would prevent scientific discussion.<sup>4</sup> His positivist position on the recording of time is not even found in discussions about the nature of time itself, where the form of these discussions is as conventional as ever. Coveney and Highfield (1990), for example, describe ways in which time may go backwards, but their discussion and conclusions are both still in the primary tenses.

Using historic tenses is an important way of removing other people from the dialogue, distancing the reader from some people whom the use of the present brings close. This is a differential distancing, in that the reader may still be close (or indeed much closer) to the writer (and to the writer's views in particular) but tends to become less so to others. The tendency to distance other people in this way may only be overcome by the sort of effort that Collingwood has notably advocated, the attempt at the subjective recreation in the present of someone else's past state of mind (Collingwood 1989: 282-302).

Of the anthropological works that are written predominantly in the historic tenses, Fabian mentions Lévi-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques* (1973) and Turnbull's *The Forest People* (1961); Barley's *The Innocent Anthropologist* (1983) is also in this category. Compared to the average ethnography, these autobiographical accounts may be more chronologically and factually accurate, but they may also be uncheckably inaccurate. They are more emotionally evocative (more elegiac, lyrical and funny, respectively), a consequence of these three writer's views being given greater prominence than their theories, which can only be derived from

3. I plan to discuss elsewhere other aspects of this dialogue and its dependence on a surprisingly large number of assumptions that are either unverifiable or wrong, a dependence which justifies the description of scientific dialogue as ritual. This discussion will include the contention that the uses of the present tense described above, with other primary tenses, constitutes an important and probably necessary aspect of both cognitive modernism and technological advance.

4. Scientific dialogue is usually conducted in the indicative mood, which implies reality (like the 'is' in this sentence), though other moods may be used. One example of the use of the subjunctive mood is my 'could' and 'would' in the sentence to which this note is appended, which imply a hypothetical or conditional state of affairs, though still in a primary tense; another is 'should' in 4e.

argument with other people. In other words, as regards such autobiographical narratives in historic tenses (but only as regards them), Fabian is right that another person in the third person singular is distanced from the dialogue, because in these books the dialogue does only have two people in it, the writer and the reader. With such autobiographical texts in the historic tenses, the reader is more closely aware of what happened as experienced (or, at any rate, described) by the narrator. This awareness produces an informative and emotional effect on the reader (similar to the effect of Type 4 statements of the writer's position—views, beliefs and feelings—on the reader), both effects depending, as in fiction, on the writer's approach to what is being described. Any such emotional effects, whether generated by reading in the armchair—as in these cases—or by being in the field, do not at the moment have generally accepted applications because of the lack of general acceptance in anthropology of a subjective psychology of emotion.

Where only historic tenses are used in non-autobiographical narrative, there is no dialogue between the reader and the writer at all—the latter has disappeared, leaving only objective statements, similar to Type 1, but in historic tenses about the past. This approach may be combined with the academic dialogue in the primary tenses, as is found in academic history and in natural science. An example of this combination of historic and primary in anthropology is to be found in another paper by Davis (1991: 12): 'Uduk construed duration as a series of alternations; Kédang added to that a sense of direction, and hence of cycles of renewal. They contrast with Yemeni tribesmen who construed time as a necessary sequence of events, and who used a generative model to explain the setting of their lives.'

In both sentences, Type 2 information has been put in a historic tense, similar to Type 1 and treated objectively. Informants have therefore been excluded from the scientific dialogue in the primary tenses, both by objectification and by the use of historic tenses, and, in consequence, they can only be observed and talked about. It is no doubt historically correct that the peoples described were, in the past, seen and heard by observing and listening anthropologists who, also in the past, recorded what they saw and were told but, as historically correct facts, these are not live contentions that are easily discussed or are apparently worth discussing. This lack of argument is brought out in two different ways by the statement in the present tense in the second sentence ('they contrast...'). First, the absence of the writer from this statement leaves it unclear to the reader whether it is of Type 1 or Type 5, whether it is an objective fact or the writer's assertion. Secondly, contrasting (and comparing) is not generalizing (Leach 1961: 6)—generalizations are Type 5 assertions, the synthetic products of observation and verbal argument, provoking further observation and further argument.

The unusual effect of the passage is increased by the absence of the definite article for the collective nouns ('Uduk' and 'Kédang', rather than 'the Uduk' and 'the Kédang'). To the use of historic tenses is added collective but apparently indeterminate objectivity, making an even greater barrier to the peoples discussed in the dialogue being admitted to it.

### Conclusion

I have argued that Fabian's thesis about the use of the present tense and the third person in anthropology is wrong. I have suggested that these and other conventions of academic dialogue allow anthropologists to give to the people that they study the same status that they give to each other, in a way that is currently precluded by using historic tenses. It is a different matter whether anthropologists do in fact grant equal status to the people they study, in academic dialogue as well as in the field. In the past, some anthropologists may have been prevented from being individually introspective or sociologically reflexive by incorrect notions about the people they studied being in important ways different from themselves, though even evolutionary errors do not deny dialogue. Anthropologists should not now easily dismiss the relatively egalitarian assumptions of their tradition of enquiry by treating the people they study as qualitatively Other because chronologically Over.

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