

# SYSTEMIC AMBIGUITY

Fuller, Matthew

Goffey, Andrew

2009

Fuller, Matthew · Goffey, Andrew

## Systemic Ambiguity

“With most species of orchids, it is not the fittest  
but the most deceptive ones that survive”

In a world in which the primary economic horizon is one of war in its various modalities, including conflict with the irreducible other, the perpetual struggle of all against all or asymmetric warfare, the kind of practical criticism traditionally carried out by intelligence and counter-intelligence operatives becomes a vital necessity. The surprise conjunction of literary criticism and geo-political strategising represented by the Cold War intelligence practices at senior levels of the CIA and its forerunners, allowed for an attentiveness to and cultivation of ambiguity that presented an invaluable means for monitoring, evaluating, manipulating and deceiving the other. Ambiguity and the mental conflict it discloses - or, indeed, creates is at once a diagnostic tool, to the extent that it symptomatises potentially antagonistic or threatening intentions, and a critical weapon to the extent that it creates doubts, uncertainties and the possibilities for divergences in the field of action in which it is at work. For the assiduous operative holed up in an office in Langley, in Ludovisi in Rome or in St James's in London, applying the same scrupulous attention to textual detail and the nuances of phrase in a covert operation such as HT/Lingual as would once have been applied to a reading of a poem by Ezra Pound or a letter composed to ee cummings appears as a geopolitical imperative and defence of imperilled imperial values [1].

The movement is from the document to the text and from there, through close reading, to the other and their intentions. With suitably muted ambiguity, Empson argued that "the fundamental situation, whether it deserves to be called ambiguous or not, is that a word or a grammatical structure is effective in several ways at once" [2]. Acknowledging the claims of his critics, that almost anything could be considered ambiguous given the expansive understanding of the notion that *The Seven Types of Ambiguity* exhibits, Empson defends his position by arguing for the [something about scientific certainties]. Incipit New Criticism and the strategy of close reading. Incipit equally James Jesus Angleton and the newly minted position of the CIA's Head of Counter-Intelligence.

For the grey eminence determined to exercise the strategic calculus of statecraft, it takes but a small permutation of the terms involved in Empson's claim that the machinations of ambiguity are among the very roots of poetry to find an artful beauty in deception. However, for literary critics and intelligence operatives working in the nascent era of mass media, with the still unchallenged cultural hegemony of the book and an education in literature as yet untroubled by the tensions to which the presence of minorities would expose the canon, the kind of ambiguity to which their eyes and ears were sensitive could be seen to arise from the intentionality and mental conflict of individuals immersed in a single language, and what is more, a language that could be considered the bearer of largely consensual, but somewhat threatened cultural values. Whilst for Empson the concern was one of bringing language under control exploring and exploiting the covert action of ambiguity, practising New Criticism CIA-style was dependent on the idea that cracks and faults in the use of language symptomatise an intention that is often undisclosed, betraying a form of *mental conflict* the disclosure of which matters for the sake of national security. Little matter that the intention could be the much fantasised one of some threat to world-historical destiny, ambiguity (a detail effective in several ways at once, alternate meanings resolved into one,

unconnected meanings given simultaneously, combined meanings indicating a complicated state of mind, fortunate confusion, irrelevance provoking interpretation, full contradiction) are indicators of deception and thus indicative of a forthcoming action, that must be thwarted, turned or inhibited, influenced by the production of material that selectively guides. The conviction of Angleton's practical criticism is that the other is always the bearer of a hidden message that close reading can disclose, and if it can't, if ambiguity cannot be resolved, then there are other techniques available for disclosing or producing hidden truths [3]. Naturally, if the other isn't behaving deceptively before the adoption of counter-measures, you can be sure that they will afterwards, as the myriad forms of blowback attest.

But the world today is a world of scripts, of databases, of data structures and algorithms, a world of machines as much as of texts or documents. Equivocal language includes not only the semantic richnesses of Shakespearean diction and the stutterphonics of Gertrude Stein but also the arid dryness and obsessively repetitive ordering of assembly language and the fanatical deductive hierarchies of first order predicate calculus. Likewise, the intentional action of an individual is only a limit case of a more general and more dispersed array of forms of agency, working with us, against us, with each other against each other: humans talking to machines, machines talking to humans, machines talking to machines and so on. In such circumstances, ambiguity is more helpfully understood as something that arises not from conflicted or covertly oppositional intentions but from the jarring and clashing, the mutating modulations of media systems, in which problematic zones of indeterminacy arise because no system ever exists in isolation and no system is ever truly 'closed'. The explicit deductive orderings of formal languages may well have presented the advantage of avoiding the evil that Tarski felt to be inherent in natural languages, but it is never quite possible to eradicate the interaction of formal systems with natural languages whether that be in the object languages that formalisms seek to ground and explicate, or in the now mundane interactions between programmed machines and their human users. When systems interact, the patterns of behaviour that they exhibit, their potential for mutual misinterpretation, grows from something arising between them, a crack, a fault or a translation failure, which then becomes a critical factor composing their internal states and evolutionary dynamic. Gilles Deleuze, borrowing from Leibniz, the genial philosopher of mathematical systems, theorises the central role of ambiguous signs in their relationship with the bifurcations that emerge around the singular points of a system. "We are, he says, no longer faced with an individuated world constituted by means of already fixed singularities, organized into convergent series...we are now faced with the aleatory point of singular points, with the ambiguous sign of singularities..." [4].

But far from reducing the opportunities for manipulation and deception, the new situation of *systemic ambiguity* opens up and extends the scope of counter-intelligence operations for the astute media operative. Of course, under such circumstances, maintaining the prerogatives of a dominant imperial centre becomes a considerable challenge, which is perhaps one reason to be thankful that many of the tools and techniques for detecting and tracking the ambiguities that portend mental conflict and social antagonism [5] can be provisionally conferred on the algorithms and data structures of dataveillance and forensic computing technologies. Notwithstanding, in a period in which it is difficult to trace patterns of conflict and the emergence of antagonisms back to a single binary opposition with any degree of plausibility, the grey zones of grey media call for new forms of investigation and a more nuanced approach to the kinds of tensions and patterns of interference that arise. If the operatives of the cold war could reserve for themselves the position of *l'eminence grise*, the distant advisor to the executive power, the new spaces of collectively intelligent networks and the asymmetrical relations these put in place demand instead the more difficult position of *l'immanence grise*.

Understanding that ambiguity is as dispersed as the forms of mediation that make up agency and that confer a consistency on the links and connections of power relationships is crucial to the development of an adequate strategic calculus. Of course, the best course of action in many circumstances is to condense these links and to focus on the ways that they sometimes converge in and on individuals the proverbial hypothesis of the weakest link in the chain is often valid. But it is a bit too easy to mistake the patterns of behavior of nodes in a network for the intentions of a subject: pattern recognition provides a comfortable resolution of the problems that systemic

ambiguity poses. However, if all you end up with when planning out your strategic calculus vis a vis others is the undisclosed intentions of subjects, then you have missed the collective, the mechanic, the practice, and you have likely turned the ambiguities of the other to the balance sheet of the moral account. As the orchid grower knows, the deception is not intentional, it is vital.

In the most banal of interactions, systemic ambiguity typically manifests itself as “user error” [6]. The erroneous ways of the user, like the bugs that our immersion in natural languages produce when brought into conjunction with formal systems, testify to the evil that an open semantics, a semantics that can't be parsed in a finite series of deductively closed steps bears within it. The explicitness of the rules according to which formal systems operate in this way works to pass judgement on the transparency of the actions and statements of whatever those systems are brought to bear against whether that be in the form of the quantifiable cataloguing of actions in an audit trail, the policy and procedures painstakingly and minutely enumerated in the documents of corporate governance, or the more mundane actions involved in producing an electronic document. The script that is followed in a call centre confers a metric on the movements of persuasion and influence in a conversation, providing an external measure on the joy of speech which works its way into the mental devices used to parse language. The caller adjusts tack accordingly and the pragmatics of the speech situation twist subtly: have a nice day now means that the supervisor can stop listening in to the conversation. Actions which might once have been performed as if they were second nature, judgements that may once have been formulated as a routine element of local knowledge, are accomplished haltingly, the uncertainties that emerge where one system decodes and recodes another generate patterns of behaviour that conflict with the newly framed norm.

User error increases to the extent that divergences from the norm increase: conflicted mentality, easy to blame on stupidity and a failure to internalise new norms of production (what do you mean, you haven't read the manual?) is more a sign of the tense bifurcations that are brought into play in a shifting ecology of media forms. Beyond a certain threshold, persistent user error may be cast as deviance, motivational deficit, a lack of adhesion to the creed expressed in the mission statement, a failure to meet the requirements specified in the job description, a failure of the education system, a weakness in the labour market. You just can't get the staff these days...."

The resolution of systemic ambiguity through the attribution of user error is itself fraught with anxiety. It is difficult to escape the assumption that the shape of actions that takes form in media systems must ultimately be understood in terms of what computers still can't do [7], implying that there is ultimately a human element that takes ultimate responsibility for the warps and shifts in a techno-social environment. Likewise, it proves difficult to conceptualise formal and natural systems without practically introducing some hierarchy between them. The three C thinking that pervades the architectures of corporate accountability offers the classic double-edged sword here: to be in charge of and take responsibility for a system, equally means accepting a level of responsibility for its failure: if your staff really are that stupid, the suspicion may of course arise that you are a cretin too. But equally and the recent problems in the financial markets offer the most obvious example here it is in the sedulous dedication to conform one's actions and judgements to the letter of what a complex technological support systems tell you to be the case that the most catastrophic stupidity arises. Once again, legacy systems from a earlier era of conflict provide the best pointers. The case of Kim Philby, frequently thought of as the 'perfect' spy, shows that it is in the most exemplary, the least ambiguous behaviour, the most dedicated adherence to norms and the most admirable professionalism, that the greatest danger lies, ultimately giving rise to the recurrent concern who or what is running who? In a world where the problem has changed and ambiguity has become systemic, it is perhaps in the Zen-like fluid adaptation to the perfections of Code, the seamlessness of flowing work, in the tireless dedication to the commands of the machine, in the willed closing of any gap between user and algorithm, that the greatest danger lies, because the absence of uncertainty, signals that the compliant user is being used and code, as they say, has become law.

Somewhat late in the day, management theory discovered that within organisations, ambiguity can have a useful strategic function. As a 'strategy in organisational communication', ambiguity fosters 'unified diversity' (what the Ancient Greeks would have called *homonía* we don't agree but it sounds like we do), maintains positions of privilege, promotes plausible deniability and facilitates organisational change. Now, quite aside from giving the scheming executive an efficiency-based rationale for his or her power games and the invaluable addition of an extra equivocation in his or her action (a point that is not usually considered in communication and organisation theory), management theory focus somewhat exclusively on verbal (written and oral) communication, precluding a more complete appreciation of colours in the operative's palette [8]. Indeed, the research focus on linguistic communication can itself have useful strategic outcomes, since it removes attention from the shifting environment in which that communication operate [9].

But systemic ambiguity suggests that it is in the subtly shifting composition of the techno-social environment, the media ecology, that the really efficacious operations of uncertainty, equivocation, hesitation and other forms of deviation and deception occur. For digital technologies, the introduction of a new piece of software produces a new enunciative 'situation', a style of statements and the engendering of particular forms of interaction. Not unreasonably, the perplexed user, at a loss to deal with a machine that doesn't easily disclose its intentions (it rarely says 'work harder' or 'think less'), frequently raises the question of what the machine wants, and in an extension of transference dynamic, repairs the gaps in the discourse of the machine ceding authority to a machine, which is thus assumed to somehow know better [10]. But as critics of both analysis and artificial intelligence have suggested, the assumption that in such situations the appearance that one thinks that the other has some profound knowledge is itself a ruse, a game.

It is not surprising then that in a complex ecology of human and non-human agents, in which unstable mediators mediate unstable media that systemic ambiguity is resolved by prompt territorialisation on one or other of the systems in relation: the philosopher's view, that anyone who tries to say more than one thing at once is a two-headed monster or a talking plant could equally be the position of software application in relation to the end user, requiring that s/he interact with it on a step by step basis. But too prompt a resolution of ambiguity precludes an understanding of the machinations that it accomplishes for philosophy, that meant a decisive misunderstanding of politics, which would continue in its sophisticated ways to the dismay of critical rationality.

Crucially, systemic ambiguity is as much about the *production* as it is about the deciphering of signs. Becoming able to read the shifting balance and distribution of forces in fluctuating patterns of uncertain signs is one thing. Being able to produce such signs, to turn them to your advantage, is another. Granted, the introduction of a new technology in the workplace (or the home little difference here) often gives rise unintentionally to the ambiguities inherent in uncertain translations from one language to another, one technology to another, one coding system to another. In these circumstances, actions which might otherwise be interpreted as malevolent powerplay can easily be recast as something else. Reskilling or modernising a workforce can be accomplished by exploiting the hesitations that arise over the interpretation of a new system (get rid of these expensive, technophobic old timers). Equally, a more adaptable, more flexible generation, anxious over the cultural privileges that accrue to older media systems, can easily be persuaded to find in the imperfect translation from one system to another, a failing and a weakness of a code or a language that lacks the familiarity of the easy acquisition. What appears truly difficult in such circumstances, is to maintain and affirm the ambiguity as such. This is because the risk associated with operating with and within the ambiguous is the risk associated with the instability and reversibility of power relations [11] Uncertainty can communicate with the perception of a lack of power and an inability to act decisively. Prolonging the indeterminacy that ambiguous signs express means, almost by definition, increasing the likelihood of contestation. When one system does not succeed in subordinating another, the translation failures that symptomatise this fault or disturbance, whether glossed as user error, bugs, bad design or system unavailability or indeed something more insidious point to aberrations in the mediation process and a trial of strength gone wrong [12] In a sense this is the problem of the early convergence on a solution by the intelligent algorithms of connectionist systems.

[1] See Michael Holzman *James Jesus Angleton. The CIA and the Craft of Counterintelligence* (Amherst: Massachusetts University Press, 2008)

[2] William Empson *The Seven Types of Ambiguity* 2nd Edition (London, Chatto and Windus, 1949) p.2.

[3] Terence Hawkes makes the crucial point that whilst Empson may have thought ambiguity would never be resolvable, this appears not to have been the case for Angleton. See Terence Hawkes 'William Empson's influence on the CIA' *Times Literary Supplement* June 10th 2009.

[4] Gilles Deleuze *The Logic of Sense* p.114

[5] A specific characteristic of the systemic ambiguity whose *mise en stratageme* we are mapping out here is that it is the expression of an *objective indeterminacy*. Ambiguity is not the merely subjective form of mental conflict, as it is in Empson. See Deleuze *ibid* and equally Gilles Deleuze *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, where the ambiguous sign is linked to Henry James as much as to Leibniz.

[6] cf Marvin Minsky 'Jokes and their Relation to the Cognitive Unconscious'

[7] The debates over artificial intelligence are a useful indicator of terms of reference of corporate power structures. If machines do all the work, the human command structure provides a convenient mechanism for apportioning responsibility. See Harry Collins and Trevor Pinch *The Shape of Actions*, Hubert Dreyfus *What Computers Still Can't Do*

[8] Typically, consideration is given to 'symbolic action'. See Eisenberg *ibid*

[9] scf 'Knowledge Creation' and discussion of tacit knowledge

[10] The concept of 'repair' comes from ethnomethodology. It is used by Collins and Pinch in their work. The use made of it here is slightly different. See Collins and Pinch *The Shape of Actions* op.cit.

[11] That power relations are inherently reversible is a point that Foucault, often considered as such intolerably pessimistic, makes with humour. Maurizio Lazzarato has extended this insight in

his work on 'les intermittents du spectacle'. However, Lazzarato prefers to see ambiguity as something separate from the techniques, technologies, practices which are used to codify and regulate behaviour. On the contrary, if power relations are formed and (literally) formatted through technologies, holding to and exploiting their reversibility entails exploring the ambiguities created by those regularising technologies themselves. See Maurizio Lazzarato *Experimentations Politiques*.

[12] On trials of strength and the problems of generalised translation failure, see Bruno Latour 'Irreductions' in *The Pasteurisation of France, Science in Action* and the first half of Graham Harman *Prince of Networks. Bruno Latour and Metaphysics*.