

## The power of the single case

Hervé Varenne

*Teachers College, Columbia University*

In the age of “big data,” what is the point of the single case, historically unique, now lost in the past of most participants—except perhaps for the recorder or analyst who writes a book about it? What can a few Mexican men who met for a few weeks thirty years ago in Southern Illinois tell us about language, literacy, migration, life in Mexico and the United States?

They can tell us about otherwise unimaginable possibilities of the human spirit.

As Tomás Kalmar reminds us, he does not write about a mass event, repeated in a similar fashion among millions, or even thousands, of Mexicans when confronted with the need to make themselves understood by potential employers in the United States. He writes about something that *can* happen. He writes about an often discounted potentiality: people can teach each other a language none of them speak, and they can do this without special schooling. He knows it because he observed how some men did this, as they were doing it, with little prodding on his part except for asking them to explain how they were doing it. As the men perform it, this is serious and purposeful work. It is also an occasion for joking and fun. It is, as some anthropologists now would say, “deep play” with potentially serious consequences. Kalmar also tells us that similar, though different, encounters happened, in other times and places when other peoples confronted other linguistic puzzles, for other purposes, whether religious, political, or scholarly.

Eventually, Kalmar writes about an analytic, theoretical, and yet very practical intelligence that can be triggered in the most unlikely of places, among the most unlikely of people, and that can produce complex analyses of local conditions—and not only about linguistic conditions. He gives us a wonderful example of how we can gain further systematic knowledge about a general truth fundamental to human history. And, by doing so, he illustrates, again, the kind of knowledge that “big data” cannot produce and that anthropology has been building up to offer: knowledge about the deliberate production of culture in all sorts of circumstances and for all sorts of reasons. The Cobden Abecedario is unique. The possibility that something like that might be produced is ubiquitous.

For any number of reasons, anthropology is not widely known for producing this very knowledge about cultural production even though it can be argued that this is where the discipline started and made its major contribution. Over much of its history, anthropology encouraged its audiences to transform “culture” into one of the conditions that shape people and limit what they can do. Culture would be something that was learned early in life by individuals, and that, then, handicapped or disabled them unless special institutions helped them deal with the difficulties. But anthropology did not quite start with such a set of assumptions. Anthropology, I offer, started with the sense that, if one looked carefully in places far away in time or space, one found that human beings are much more productive in constituting, or designing, lives for themselves than most theories of humanity could imagine, even when the theories are supported by a large amount of data. What anthropological research across the globe demonstrated was that it is easy for those who would measure humanity not to notice that they easily miss much that is fundamental—including the altogether surprising flexibility of human beings as they keep adapting to hostile environments—whether the hostility is geographical or socio-political. Human beings left the plateaus of East Africa tens of thousand years ago, and now can survive on the moon. They probably started in small bands with limited institutional specialization, and now continue to dispute who should regulate and in what ways, sexuality, reproduction, marriage, inheritance, birth privilege, etc. They started moving across landscapes, and they keep moving, across such in-human (if one thinks socio-biologically, or humanistically) boundaries as inter-national frontiers that are of course the fully human, in a cultural sense, product of history.

*Illegal alphabets* is one of the many works of the past quarter century that recaptures the excitement of the time when Boas, Rivers, Malinowski, Mead, and others brought back evidence that, in the nooks and crannies of islands, mountains, deserts, human beings were doing wonderful things. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the nooks and crannies are most often found in urban centers, migrants camps or refugee centers, but the excitement is the same.

Down the street and around the corner, up or down this way or that, some people are doing what most theories of the impact of late modernity, complex industrialization, neo-liberalism, etc., cannot imagine they are doing. They may even teach themselves a language none of them can speak! They can do so by analyzing what they hear, in context, and then by assessing whether their hypothetical analysis corresponded both to what might work interactionally, and to the representations that the target language uses. They do this, “against the odds”—as calculated by social statisticians who do not have the tools to reveal the powerful unique. People do this by getting together, figuring out their resources, deliberating, that is, in my summary term,<sup>25</sup> “educating” themselves while producing something new, fleeting, and unique—for example the Cobden Abecedario.

Kalmar discusses extensively how the *possibility* of such processes of joint deliberation about language and its organization or representation is *not* unique. There are many examples of people conducting such analyses, though they are easy to miss when they are not the product of “experts” with esoteric knowledge. Kalmar lists some of those. Another powerful example can be found in the many cases of Africans, enslaved in the United States, teaching themselves how to read English.<sup>26</sup> It is probable that we would have more examples if we had paid closer attention to the language about language that is produced by the non-expert in the course of their lives. Many years ago, Roman Jakobson had affirmed that “metalanguage is not only a necessary scientific tool utilized by logicians and linguists; it plays also an important role in our everyday language.”<sup>27</sup> Ofelia Garcia has been drawing the consequences by writing about what she terms “linguaging”<sup>28</sup> that is the process by which new languages (and literacies) emerge in and through interaction whether in the more local of familial contacts or through various forms of global media.

Kalmar, like Garcia, is writing about the linguistic activities of the non-expert, in settings not directly controlled by the state—and certainly not for the purposes to which they are being put. He is writing about what has been called “informal” education, or “community education,” though these words do not capture the fundamental or general character of the activity. For this is work that precedes and follows the work of those who may be granted by some corporation or state the special status of analyst, writer, curriculum developer, assessor. It is work that encompasses the work of the specialist even if the specialist loses sight of the political processes that constitute the status. Jacques Rancière has explored how this blindness has been induced through the history of European philosophy, from Plato onwards<sup>29</sup> and how it has prevented experts from noticing and acknowledging the education that the “ignorant” give each other.<sup>30</sup> Kalmar, with many others, has shown that this philosophical critique of philosophy has much empirical evidence to back it. It is time for us to make our colleagues pay attention, and policy-makers draw the practical consequences.

### Works Cited

- Garcia, Ofelia, 2013. Informal bilingual acquisition: Dynamic spaces for language education. In D. Singleton, J.A. Fishman, L. Aronin, & M. O Laoire (Eds.), *Current multilingualism: A new linguistic dispensation*, pp. 99-118. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Gundaker, Grey, 2008 [2007]. Hidden Education Among African Americans During Slavery. In *Anthropological perspectives on education*, ed. by H. Varenne and E. Gordon, 53-74. Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press
- Jakobson, Roman, 1985 [1956]. Meta language as linguistic problem. In *Roman Jakobson, Selected Writings, VII*, ed. by S. Rudy, 113-121. The Hague: Mouton.
- Rancière, Jacques, 1999 [1987]. *The ignorant schoolmaster: Five lessons in intellectual emancipation*. Tr. by K. Ross. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- 2004 [1983] *The philosopher and his poor*. Tr. by J. Drury, C. Oster, and A. Parker. Durham, NC: Duke University Press
- Varenne, Hervé, 2007. Difficult collective deliberations: Anthropological notes towards a theory of education. *Teachers College Record* 109, 7: 1559-1587.

---

<sup>25</sup> Varenne 2007

<sup>26</sup> Gundaker 2008

<sup>27</sup> Jakobson 1960: 354

<sup>28</sup> Garcia 2013

<sup>29</sup> Rancière 2004 [1983]

<sup>30</sup> Rancière 1999 [1987]