

HANDOUT CLASS 3

TASK 1 Critical thinking - evaluating types of source

1 Match sources 1–6 from the area of social anthropology with genres a–f.

Sources

- 1 Empson, R. (2011) *Harnessing Fortune: Personhood, Memory, and Place in Mongolia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- 2 Lavenda, R. & Schultz, E. (2012). *Anthropology: What Does It Mean To Be Human?* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- 3 Monaghan, J. & Just, P. (2000). *Social and Cultural Anthropology: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- 4 Shea, N. (2010) 'Africa's Last Frontier' in *National Geographic magazine*, March 2010.
- 5 'Anthropology' <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anthropology>, accessed January 16th 2013.
- 6 Singer, A. (2008) 'Anthropology on television' ASA *Globalog* website of Association of Social Anthropologists <http://blog.theasa.org/?p=107>.

Genres

- a an undergraduate textbook
 - b a monograph
 - c a popular book aimed at a general audience
 - d an online encyclopaedia written by members of the public
 - e an academic blog
 - f a journalistic article
- 2 Work in groups. Classify the sources in 1 as *academic*, *popular academic*, or *non-academic*. Give reasons.
- 3 Discuss how you would (or would not) use the sources in 1:
- to cite in an essay
 - to cite in a seminar discussion
 - as background reading to help you understand a topic
 - to keep up-to-date with ideas in the area.

GLOSSARY

monograph (*n*) a detailed study of a specialized academic subject, usually in the form of a short book

TASK 2 Recognizing narrative in source texts

- 1 Read Texts 1–3, focusing especially on the outlined *narrative* or story sections. As you read, make notes under headings a–c.
 - a the location / host culture
 - b the 'outsider(s)'
 - c the cultural difference / practice
- 2 Work in groups. Choose one of the texts to read in more detail. Discuss the questions.
 - 1 What impression do you get of the culture described – what picture do you have in your mind of the people, the location, and their way of life?
 - 2 How familiar or strange does the cultural practice described seem to you – can you draw any parallels from your own experience?
 - 3 In your own words, summarize the key concept described in the part of the text *after* the narrative.

TEXT 1

Why do cultural differences matter?

The same objects, actions, or events frequently mean different things to people with different cultures. In fact, what counts as an object or event in one tradition may not be recognized as such in another. This powerful lesson of anthropology was illustrated by the experience of some Peace Corps volunteers working in southern Africa.

In the early 1970s, the Peace Corps office in Botswana was concerned by the number of volunteers who seemed to be 'burned out'; failing in their assignments, leaving the assigned villages, and increasingly hostile to their Tswana hosts. The Peace Corps asked American anthropologist Hoyt Alverson, who was familiar with Tswana culture and society, for advice. Alverson (1977) discovered that one major problem the Peace Corps volunteers were having involved exactly this issue of similar actions having very different meanings. The volunteers complained that the Tswana would never leave them alone. Whenever they tried to get away and sit by themselves for a few minutes to have some private time, one or more Tswana would quickly join them. This made the Americans angry. From their perspective, everyone is entitled to a certain amount of privacy and time alone. To the Tswana, however, human life is social life; the only people who want to be alone are witches and the insane. Because these young Americans did not seem to be either, the Tswana who saw them sitting alone naturally assumed that there had been a breakdown in hospitality and the volunteers would welcome some company. Here, one behaviour – a person walking out into a field and sitting by himself or herself – had two very different meanings.

From this example, we can see that human experience is inherently ambiguous. Even within a single cultural tradition, the meaning of an object or an action may differ, depending on the context. Quoting philosopher Gilbert Ryle, anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973: 6) noted that there is a world of difference between a wink and a blink, as anyone who has ever mistaken one for the other has undoubtedly learnt. To resolve the ambiguity, experience must be interpreted, and human beings regularly turn to their own cultural traditions in search of an interpretation that makes sense. They do this daily as they go about life among others with whom they share traditions. Serious misunderstandings may arise, however, when individuals confront the same ambiguous situation without realizing that their cultural ground rules differ.

What is ethnocentrism?

Ethnocentrism is the term anthropologists use to describe the opinion that one's own way of life is natural or correct, indeed the only way of being fully human. Ethnocentrism is one solution to the inevitable tension when people with different cultural backgrounds come into contact. It reduces the other way of life to a version of one's own. Sometimes we correctly identify meaningful areas of cultural overlap. At other times, we are shocked by the differences we encounter. We may conclude that if our way is right, then their way can only be wrong. (Of course, from their perspective, our way of life may seem to be a distortion of theirs.)

SOURCE: Lavenda, R. & Schultz, E. (2012). pp.220-221. *Anthropology: what does it mean to be human?* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Vessels of harnessed fortune

TEXT 2

It was late spring, but the morning air was cold. There had been a hard frost overnight and I found it hard to get out of bed. Mornings meant helping Delgermaa set the fire and milk the cows before we let the calves out for the day, or gave the cattle hay, and then settled down for tea and soda bread with fresh cream and jam. This morning was different. Outside, Delgermaa and I shouted instructions to each other as we struggled to corral the bull calf into a small pen. As soon as it was in, Delgermaa climbed nimbly into the enclosure and approached the animal. Our movements in the morning had become so familiar that I hardly noticed when she bent over and swiftly wiped the inside of her coat over its muzzle. She repeated this action and then pulled out a pair of scissors and cut off a small handful of hair from the young animal's tail. She tied this into a loose knot before placing it inside her pocket. Her actions were quick and it would have been easy to miss them, but I later learnt that they had to be performed before she handed over the animal to the men who had come to collect it. The money from its sale would go towards her daughter's university fees, its meat would go to people in the district centre or to the markets of Ulaanbaatar. The tuft of tail hair remained in the house. [...]

In this chapter I focus on practices involved in harnessing fortune for households. These practices permeated many activities for countryside and district centre households as people worked to secure the prosperity and wellbeing of their families. In trying to understand what is meant by fortune, I compare this concept to the Polynesian concept of '*mand*', and the Japanese practice of 'beckoning luck'. Shifting ideas of fortune are also traced in relation to different historical periods. By focusing on various actions involved in 'harnessing fortune' (*hishig hürteh*), from livestock to mountain ceremonies, certain features come to the fore. This leads me to consider not so much what fortune is, but how it is made to appear through the various practices in which it is attended.

SOURCE: Empson, R. (2011). pp. 67-69. *Harnessing Fortune: Personhood, Memory, and Place in Mongolia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ñañuu María gets hit by lightning: people and their selves

TEXT 3

While on a visit to Nuyoo in 1994, John visited Ñañuu María Lopez, who had provided him with meals when he had first visited Nuyoo a decade earlier. By this time she was quite old and John asked her how she was doing. She replied that she had been sick for several months owing to a terrible burn she had received. Thinking her house had caught fire, John immediately asked after the other members of her family, who, she said, were fine; what had happened was, she had been hit by lightning while out in the fields. Later on John commented on this chance event and María's miraculous survival to her neighbours, who professed to know nothing about her being hit by lightning. One young man, however, who knew something about the incident, jumped in and said he knew that she had been asleep in her house when the lightning struck; it was her 'animal' (*kiti nuvi*) which had been hit by the bolt.

The Mixtec, like other Mesoamerican people, believe that living things that come into the world at the same time are fundamentally linked to one another. An animal and a human born at the same moment will thus share life experiences, are often said to have a single soul, and will, at times, share a consciousness. This latter most often occurs through dreams, which may be interpreted as the world seen through the eyes of one's 'coessential' animals (so labelled because the animals and their human counterparts are essentially linked). In Ñañuu María's case her *kiti nuvi* is a small, playful, furry creature called a coati (this had been determined years beforehand through divination and because like the coati she had a special liking for bananas). It was on one of its nocturnal journeys that the coati had been hit by lightning.

The idea of the coessential animal is something that to us seems a bit far-fetched. But the Mixtec case is far from unique, and ethnographers report many examples of traditions that hold that things not physically attached to the body are an intimate part of the self. For the Mixtec, the concept of the coessential animal is at least as complex and comprehensive as the *id* or *superego*, and has no less basis in empirical science: it explains good and bad luck, sudden and even deadly illnesses, the nature of dreams, and even why some individuals have more wealth and power than others, since those with big, ferocious animals such as jaguars stand higher in the social hierarchy than those with small, innocuous animals such as rabbits.

SOURCE: Monaghan, J. & Just, P. (2000). pp.131-132. *Social and Cultural Anthropology: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

GLOSSARY

Nuyoo a town in south west Mexico

- 3 Which statement, **a** or **b**, best describes the function of the *narrative* in each of the three texts?
- a The narrative serves as an example to support the explanation of a general theory or concept.
 - b The narrative describes the main focus of research and then is linked to more general theories.
- 4 Present a brief summary of your group's discussion on each text to the class. What are the key differences between the text types you have looked at? Explain why these differences exist.
- 5 Give examples of narrative accounts in your own discipline, i.e. types of writing that might involve a first person (*I / we*) or third person (*he / she*) description of events.
- Example:** *In health science, you might have to write a report of a work placement, a bit like a diary, describing your experience and what you learnt from it.*

TASK 3 Identifying different writing styles

- 1 Work in pairs to compare extracts A–E. Which language features are *more formal / specialized* and which are *more informal / for a non-expert audience*? Consider:
- vocabulary
 - sentence length and grammatical construction
 - use of personal / impersonal language.

A **Ethnocentrism** is the term anthropologists use to describe the opinion that one's own way of life is natural or correct, indeed the only way of being fully human.

SOURCE: Lavenda & Schultz (2012), anthropology textbook

B By focusing on various actions involved in 'harnessing fortune' (*hishig hürteh*), from livestock to mountain ceremonies, certain features come to the fore. This leads me to consider, not so much what fortune is, but how it is made to appear through the various practices in which it is attended.

SOURCE: Empson (2011), academic monograph

C The idea of the coessential animal is something that to us seems a bit far-fetched.

SOURCE: Monaghan & Just (2000), popular introduction to anthropology

D For generations the tribes of the Omo were shielded from the outside world by mountains, savanna, and by Ethiopia's unique status as the only African nation never to have been colonized by Europeans. In the late 1960s and '70s, anthropologists began recognizing what that meant - people living near the river had largely escaped the colonial blundering and conflict that shredded other societies.

SOURCE: Shea (2010), *National Geographic* magazine

E The recent plethora of 'tribal' reality shows favours entertainment at the expense of education, while the indigenously-produced films favoured by anthropologists (at least, the ones I have seen) are heavily weighted towards the informative end of the spectrum.

SOURCE: Course (2008), anthropology blog post

ACADEMIC LANGUAGE

Style (3) Marked language

Academic writing is relatively formal in style. However, texts written for a general audience, such as magazines, popular books, or websites, may use more informal expressions and/or colourful, descriptive, or idiomatic language to appeal to non-academic readers.

- from a popular academic anthropology book, *jump in* (v) = informal, meaning 'interrupt':
*One young man **jumped in** and said ...*
- from an article in *National Geographic* magazine, *serpentine* (adj) = literary, meaning 'curving like a snake':
*Near the Kenyan border the river carves **serpentine** oxbows ...*

Expert academic writers sometimes used **marked** language; language that is not in the style of the genre and so stands out as different. This may be as part of a narrative describing an event or scene:

- from Text 2, *nimbly* (adv) = descriptive, meaning 'moving quickly and easily':
*Delgermaa climbed **nimbly** into the enclosure.*

You need to recognize marked language so that you do not use it inappropriately in your own writing. Informal, journalistic, or colourful words or expressions can sound awkward in a student essay.

Sometimes academic writers acknowledge their use of marked language by putting it in quotation marks.

- from Text 3, *burned out* (phr v) = informal, meaning 'very tired from too much work':
*the number of volunteers who seemed to be **'burned out'***

If you want to use an interesting, but possibly marked, expression from your reading, it is better to include it in quotation marks.

TASK 4 Recognizing levels of formality and marked language

1 Look at the list below. Match pairs of words or phrases with similar meanings.

a bit blunder broke clear up deplete envelop error far-fetched
implausible insolvent miss out nimbly omit resolve somewhat
surround swiftly use up

Example: *far-fetched - implausible (= difficult to believe)*

2 For each pair, categorize the words / phrases as:

- typically academic - formal or neutral
- marked in academic writing - informal or literary.

Example: *far-fetched = quite informal; implausible = neutral*

TASK 5 Independent research - recognizing writing styles

- 1 Find at least three texts of different genres within your discipline, in print or online. Try to find an example of a narrative.
- 2 Some disciplines, such as Law and Medicine, are dominated by formal, impersonal language. Others involve a mix of writing styles used in different genres. Looking at your three texts, note to what degree they vary in terms of writing style.
- 3 Report your findings to the class. Discuss the different genres and any differences between disciplines.