Language and Life: A Commentary on the Work of R. S. Perinbanayagam

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I have been a reader of Robert Perinbanayagam’s work since 1984 when I heard him present the SSSI Distinguished Lecture at the society’s annual meeting in San Antonio, Texas, published under the title, “The Meaning of Uncertainty and the Uncertainty of Meaning” (1986). Unusual when compared to the larger body of Perinbanayagam’s writings, that paper presents a systematic statement about the problems inherent in theories of signification and language, process and structure. One might even describe these reflections as metatheoretical, since Perinbanayagam raises questions about the relationship between “processes of the world” and their conceptualization in language and in theory. In fact, the paper may be read as an extended reflection on social reality and theories that attempt to conceptualize and describe social reality and its processual and fleeting nature in particular. In the article at hand, “Telic Reflections,” Perinbanayagam refers to these as “interactional processes, as such,” and at other times “the world as it is,” which he analytically distinguishes from the “structures” (language, discourse, etc.) through which life-as-process is grasped—by social actors themselves as well as by those of us who study and conceptualize “action” and “interaction.”

In the preparation of this commentary on “Telic Reflections” and on Perinbanayagam’s work, I found myself turning back to the “Uncertainty” paper (1986) as a helpful, even an instructive text about the “paradox of significance and meaning” (1986:110)—particularly because it addresses a problem so central to his entire corpus: the nature of human activity as a process that achieves meaning through a stable system of linguistic forms. But despite its centrality in Perinbanayagam’s thought and work, in other writings this problem remains largely implicit, tacit, or as part of a subtext—albeit one that gets told and retold with different subject matters, terms, and themes.

SYNTHETIC STUDIES IN STRUCTURE AND PROCESS

One way to read Perinbanayagam’s works—and I will propose another shortly—is as synthetic studies in structure and process. In The Karmic Theater (1982), a study
of the practice of astrology among Jaffna Tamils of Sri Lanka (Ceylon), we are given a structuralist reading of the interactionist theories of the self and an interactionist reading of the meaning of myths in everyday life. Astrology itself is shown to be a language with metaphoric, syntactical, binary, and other linguistic features. In *Signifying Acts* (1985), Perinbanayagam provides what Fred Davis (1985:x), in his memorable foreword, called “a coherent and integrated paradigm of human action, of the actors who embody it, and of the existential grounding of their actions.” In chapter after chapter, the author searches out the common and unifying themes of human action and interaction—symbolism, meaning, language, and grammar. In *Discursive Acts* (1991:xii), dialogue—the activity of speaking and conversing with the other—is portrayed as “the central event of human being and doing” and the “defining principle” of all human action. This argument is cast against the prevailing arguments from structuralists and ethnomethodologists on the formal and structural properties of language and conversation. In contrast to these claims, the full range of “discursive acts” reveals language as a *double process* (Perinbanayagam notes his indebtedness to Mikhail Bakhtin)—as spoken and artful practices that follow an inherent logic and structure of language itself. In *The Presence of Self* (2000:xii), the problem of the nature and form of “agency” is addressed through a pragmatic theory of the agent that places emphasis on the act of presencing the self: selves are “put into play by a cognitive and sentient and reflexive actor” who both feels and senses the world in all its given-ness and acts in that world at the same time. In each of the works cited above, “structure” and “process” come alive as the “twin narratives” lived out by active selves. The paradox of significance and meaning is revealed in different contexts—through a people’s mythic practices, in the unity of signifying acts, in the formal and spoken features of language, in the presence of a social self: “meaning is achieved by means of a dialectical process, but the units of significance that are used to achieve it are stable forms that maintain an identity unto themselves” (Perinbanayagam 1986:110).

Perinbanayagam’s central theme—the dialectic of structure and process—moves between two domains: *first*, the domain of *life itself* (“interactional processes, as such”) and how life itself (and “self as process”) is structured in and through the systems of language and speech that impose and provide a necessary order and organization and objectivity to process; *second*, the domain of *social theory* where theories of process and theories of structure represent polarities. A theoretical synthesis is needed, Perinbanayagam argues, that will reveal the dialectical nature of human action and avoid the “metaphysics of extremes” (1984:xiv) represented by two approaches in contemporary social theory: one emphasizing subjective meaning and interpretation (hermeneutics, existentialism, phenomenology); the other, objective structures of language (the varieties of structuralism and poststructuralism). In *The Presence of Self* (2000), Perinbanayagam refers to his own theory as a “symbolic interactionism” as well as a “structuralist interactionism,” thereby capturing the two terms in need of dialectical synthesis. In “Telic Reflections,” we read
that all social phenomena possess both processive and concrete features; actions and doings are simultaneously dynamic and situated.

Throughout Perinbanayagam’s writings, other terms and designations also capture this dialectical or synthetic project with reference to interaction itself, as well as in his theoretical construction of social action. He uses terms and headings and titles that contain opposing (or seemingly opposing) terms or categories to express the synthetic unity he seeks to achieve in his text: “structure and meaning,” “the structure of motives,” “the emergence of meaning,” “structures of significance,” “dialectics of discourse,” “discursive emotions,” and so forth. But nowhere is it expressed more tellingly than in his preface to *Signifying Acts:*  

There is structure and process, there is subjectivity, after a fashion, and objectivity, and indeed, both rationalism and empiricism are necessary to solve the great mystery of the beingness of the individual and the actions of the self as ongoing constructions. . . . The work in all these chapters develops . . . the same theme: the existence of structure and meaning, self and other, the dialectic of being and emergence, leading to a dialectical interactionism. (1985:xiv-xv)

Many of Perinbanayagam’s commentators and reviewers have noted the important intellectual links of his work with the work of G. H. Mead and Kenneth Burke. But few have noted how Perinbanayagam’s synthetic project sounds a striking and sympathetic note with the work of the philosopher Paul Ricoeur. I am thinking particularly of Ricoeur’s attempts to work through the “conflict of interpretations” found in structuralism, on the one hand, and hermeneutics, on the other—the unresolved themes of contemporary studies in the philosophy of language: language treated as a closed system of signs, a reductive system that suppresses the speech acts of subjects. “Structural thought remains a thought that does not think itself” (Ricoeur 1974:51). A theory of interpretation (“a reflective philosophy to understand itself as a hermeneutics”) allows for the “recovery” of subjects’ intentionalities through a hermeneutics of symbolic expressions. But this project is not a return to earlier (prelinguistic) philosophies of subjectivity (Ricoeur 1974:51). Rather, for Ricoeur, the subject becomes like a text: “the subject as text is a text that is symbolic and, therefore, calls for a work of deciphering” (1974:xv).

As we find in Perinbanayagam’s portrayal of the self—a self that is conceptualized as both process (“eddies in the ongoing current”) and “narration” (“a logically and poetically and rhetorically constituted concept”)—this self no longer remains solely or principally on the level of consciousness, reflexivity, or even in the domain of “social objects” (Mead 1934:136-42, 277–81).2 In a conversation with contemporary philosophers of language and meaning, Perinbanayagam conceives the self as “fundamentally a symbolic, that is to say a linguistic, construct and hence tangible and materialized in the structures of the language in which it is encoded” (1985:84). In *Discursive Acts,* “the self is an assemblage of signs, a more or less coherent text that a mind claims as its own and identifies as a presence in a world of others.” Selves are iconic, indexical, symbolic (1991:9–13). In *The Presence of Self,* the self—as both a feature of “mind” (in Mead’s sense) and a display to others—exists neither
as a substance nor an abstraction but as an act: it is the act of presentencing the self that gives it form; in the world, it is as a living performance that it manifests itself—keeping faith with the pragmatist maxim that it is the act itself and its consequences that define human beings and human existence.

This brings us to another key term of Perinbanayagam’s—one, of course, shared with pragmatism, the primacy of the act.

**THE PRIMACY OF THE ACT**

Perinbanayagam’s dialectical synthesis of structure and process is accomplished through a theory of the act. "Acting is the font, the creative center, the active principle of all social life" ("Telic Reflections"). Perinbanayagam’s entire body of writing may be read as an application and extension of the pragmatist and Meadian theory of the act. His achievement—written in the trilogy, *Signifying Acts, Discursive Acts, The Presence of Self*—is his reinterpretation of Mead through a reading of late-twentieth-century works in linguistics, semiotics, discourse analysis, and other philosophies of language. In these works, Mead’s theory of the act—his concepts of gesture, symbol, signification, perspective, and meaning—is brought into conversation with contemporary studies in the philosophy of language and meaning. The outcome is a fully developed theory of human being and action. As Davis remarked with such insight and enthusiasm in his foreword to the first volume of this trilogy:³

*Signifying Acts* now locates for sociology and social psychology . . . that tradition which has come to be known as *symbolic interactionism*. . . more tellingly than has any work since Herbert Blumer some fifteen years ago grouped a number of his essays into a volume by that name. . . . [T]he “something special” . . . Perinbanayagam brings to symbolic interactionism is that, like no one before him, he moves decisively toward establishing a coherent position for the perspective vis-à-vis a number of important post–World War II intellectual currents. . . . What emerges is . . . a coherent and integrated paradigm of human action. (1985:ix–x)

Perinbanayagam shares Mead’s theoretical conviction of "the act" as a theory of human acting and knowing that resolves—through a reconciliation of oppositions—the dualisms of philosophical realism and idealism, also known as the philosophical opposition of “words” and “things,” the subjective realm of ideas and the objective realm of material realities. In the case of Mead, the relationship of *subjects* and *objects* (terms he and the pragmatists recognized as inextricably linked to the time-worn assumptions of classical Western philosophies of knowledge) was not principally cognitive. Knowledge was one facet of an active, developing relationship between organisms and their environments, rather than between knowing subjects and known objects. This new evolutionary emphasis Mead developed in his philosophy of the act—and it operates in all his thinking on mind, self, language, and temporality as its central philosophical theme. As Tibbetts (1974:116) explained, “With the shift toward a more biological/behavioral model of the subject-object relation there was . . . a corresponding interest in explicating the concept of behavior or the ‘act.’"
Mead’s theory of the act (and his recasting of knowledge within that philosophy) rejected the idea of the primacy either of the experience of subjects or of an external reality of things that stands on its own. The idea that knowledge mirrors some independent reality Mead replaced with the idea that knowledge (more accurately, “knowing”) is an emergent stage of action and that reality is an accomplishment of people’s transactions (or interactions) with social objects—persons and things. Mead’s theory of “mind” (in place of “knowledge”) portrays this active, bodily relation—mental and physical, symbolic and sensual—between human organisms and the objects they fashion into a many-layered reality. He intended to replace the personal and individual connotations of subjects with “mind,” a collective term connoting mental functions. The habitat of mind is language, which Mead (1934:6, n. 6) also conceived as a particular kind of activity. The study of the process of language and speech is, he claimed, a “branch of social psychology,” because language is best understood as a social process and a social activity.

Writing during the last decades of the twentieth century, Perinbanayagam no longer seeks to resolve philosophical realism and idealism, at least not principally. After all, pragmatism—Dewey, Mead, Peirce, and others—posed a significant intellectual challenge to Western philosophy and its dualisms. In particular, the over-determined picture of the world associated with philosophical realism, as well as rationalism and mechanicism, underwent significant challenges from pragmatism and from late-twentieth-century writers in social philosophy and modern physics. Here, I am thinking especially of the challenge of pragmatism to rationalism’s idea of reality as “ready made”—“for pragmatism [reality] is still in the making” (James [1907] 1955:167). This idea of reality-as-process and its accompanying ideas of “uncertainty” and “indeterminacy” are also part of the revolution in thinking in modern physics whose “measurement problem” Perinbanayagam himself wrote about (1986). These are some of the matters on Perinbanayagam’s mind—at least matters I would impute to his mind. They are matters that follow on philosophy’s “linguistic turn” and the twentieth-century science of linguistics, particularly methods centered on the problem of the sign. They also concern what today in the human sciences we call “human agency”—a concept that joins “structural determination” with contingency. All of these matters have taken us, taken Perinbanayagam, to an intellectual universe where the act is a signifying act and where “reality” itself is a problem having to do with language and its operations. Language is no longer one aspect of human being, it is built into every feature of human being and acting.

Like Mead, Perinbanayagam turns to a theory of the act or human action as a unifying term for resolving opposing theories—in this case, theories of structure (language-as-system) and theories of hermeneutics (language-as-discourse). In the former, language operates as a closed, atemporal system of signs; in the latter, language takes place in time, in the present. Spoken language (discourse) is also an open and intentional act directed toward an end (telos), one in which an active agent takes into account the other that is present in the situation. Signifying or discursive acts also involve a series of choices by which certain meanings are selected
and others excluded, lending to the act an openness or uncertain quality. Unlike the arguments from the structuralists and poststructuralists who find in “structure” and “discourse” the closing off of “subjectivity,” Perinbanayagam argues for a subject who is active and present in dialogical activities. Language is lived in and through the dialogues of social actors whose presences are felt.

For Perinbanayagam, the social act is a signifying act, meaning that all social acts have the qualities of language. Reasoning this way, Perinbanayagam extends Mead’s conception of language-as-activity and understands the act according to the features and functions of language-as-system and language-as-speech. For example, in *Signifying Acts*, acts are construed as grammati, stylistic, phonetic, and prosodic; there is a “grammar of situations,” for situations are assembled according to rules (1986:70–73). Similarly, the relations of selves and others are “syntactical”; self and other are morphological elements arranged and poised on the brink of meaning (1985:chap. 6; cf. 1982:11–14). The self is also given a textual “reading” just as language is the primary phenomenon structuring acts. Language is presented as a model for studying those features of social life that place limits or structures on acts of signification: situations, roles, the other, life programs, motives of action, and so forth.

“Discursive acts”—an important reconceptualization of Mead’s theory of the act—involves active agents as producers of signs; these signs make one’s meanings and intentions interpretable to one’s self and the other and, thereby, available to self and other as “objectified” acts. In discourse, social actors discover self and other as objects, knowable each to the other; for this reason, interaction occurs as inter-objective relations. The overall project of *Discursive Acts* (1991) is to propose the various ways that language is involved in the “construction” and continuity of a self, including a typology of eighteen discursive acts or “forms of discourse” (chap. 6). Acts are preeminently projects where the human agent, conceived and formed out of the discursive structures of one’s lifeworld, nevertheless finds a critical space within which to initiate certain moves and to claim an identity. In the fulcrum of the act it is the agent or self who is acting and whose presence is known and felt: “Language as such exists, not in the structures of the brain but in the active uses to which they are put, and such uses are inherently dialogic” (“Telic Reflections”).

**TELIC REFLECTIONS**

Among others, the themes discussed above are the subject matter of “Telic Reflections: Interactional Processes, as Such.” As with each of Perinbanayagam’s writings, the essay contains multiple meanings and messages, one of which is an appeal to sociologists to observe and describe “interactional processes, as such”—“as such,” that is, as they are, as they really are, as they actually take place, principally in and through conversations and dialogues.

To make his point about the simple and direct nature of this type of sociological investigation, Perinbanayagam introduces Leo Bruce’s fictional detective, the
apparently bumbling and simplistic Sergeant Beef—for Perinbanayagam an appealingly straightforward human figure. There is a similarity between Sergeant Beef’s investigative “methods and those used by sociologists who study the interactional processes of everyday life . . . committed to the world that is, and to the avoidance of dense vocabularies or philosophical obfuscations.” And despite his disclaimer, Perinbanayagam clearly wants to draw a parallel here between the view and method of pragmatist interactionism (“committed to the world that is . . .”) and postmodernist theories of discourse, high-minded and obscurantist.

“Telic Reflections” is an appeal for careful studies of everyday life and for the “primacy of the interactional realm” that is also a celebration of the self—the ordinary self, the self of the quotidian, the ordinary speaker who is not so ordinary at all—not unlike the selves that we discover in Erving Goffman’s work. Both authors possess a perceptive eye and ear for the speech and actions of ordinary people. But Goffman leaves us with a kind of irreverent, sometimes absurd vision of everyday reality and a sense of the self as gamesman, trickster, con man. In the case of Perinbanayagam, the speech acts of ordinary people elicit a certain wonderment and affection for them as players and dreamers and joke tellers. They are rhetoricians and artists in their own right who bring both artistry and artfulness to their performances: “everyone is both philosopher and poet” in his or her everyday life (“Telic Reflections”). In *The Presence of Self*, various acts of making oneself understood are described (after Kenneth Burke) as “rhetorical devices” or reflexive strategies employed by selves to form attitudes and to elicit action. Similarly, identity is presented as a poetic and playful and skillful production or the dramatic effect of Everyman—“Wherever there are selves and interactions there also will be rhetoric and poetry” (2000:276).

This celebration of human artistry fills Perinbanayagam’s writings. They abound, as does this essay, with allusions to and citations of prose and poetry from religious, classical, and modern sources. The epigram to this essay chosen by Perinbanayagam from Ursula Le Guin, “only in silence the word . . .,” does not so much elucidate his title, “Telic Reflections,” as reflect on the dialectical nature of reality, as such. How do we know and experience silence, darkness, dying? It is in and through their oppositions—in the word we know silence, in the darkness we know light, in life, death. This is—as the structuralists have shown—about the binary system of language, a system that is not only about language as a system of opposing sounds and meanings but also about the binary systems in which meanings emerge. Symbols and meanings, Perinbanayagam has argued here and throughout his works, do not stand alone but are grasped within *systems* of symbols and meanings. Recall, in this essay, the author’s discussion about the cactus in the desert, “in interaction with the other elements of the desert,” standing there “aloof, alone, and tall in contrast to the flatness of the desert” (“bright the hawk’s flight on the empty sky”). Everything seen and interpreted is always grasped, known within a system, and is in interaction with other units and elements in that system: “Everything that we see and observe is always in the presence of another object and in interaction with it, in one way or another.”
Finally, something should be said of the “telic” in these extended reflections on interactional processes, as such. Telic, of course, means more than one thing: these telic are final, concluding reflections — reflections after the trilogy, reflections on what I (the author) have said but am saying to you (readers) again. In the preface to The Presence of Self (2000: xii), its author describes this third volume in the trilogy as a “final essay.” Telic also means toward an end (telos) — the end toward which I move and act, belonging to a future that defines, in part, my present, my here and now. These meanings of telic/telos are also a feature of acts: there is an openness to acts; acts are movements in time and space, and while they are situated, these acts are part of a movement or trajectory — outward, forward. In the “Uncertainty” (1986:109–10) essay, the meanings of acts are in their responses when they achieve “telic completion.” In Signifying Acts (1985:12), acts demand completion in the responses of the other. This lends a fundamental uncertainty to acts; meanings truly emerge. The production of meaning is “entelechial”: this “inherent uncertainty” of acts “provides an awesome openness to transactions, as well as reasons for attempts to contain it.” These meanings of telic signify as well Perinbanayagam’s argument throughout his writings on acts and selves, that there is an inherent uncertainty and openness to acts. In our studies of acts and selves, he argues, our sociologies need theories and methods that can grasp the vital features of both acts and selves as parts of process and structure. In the conclusion to the “Uncertainty” paper (1986:124), Perinbanayagam summed it up this way: “We need . . . concepts and methods that are flexible, mobile, relative, interconnected and united in their contradictions to provide adequate descriptions of our worlds. . . . [W]e have to consider processes of symbolic interaction with the structures of language and the instrumentalities of the act.”

In the concluding paragraph of “Telic Reflections,” Perinbanayagam’s last word is of the “primacy of the interactional realm.” Interactions — especially dialogues — are not only the materials for sociological inquiry, they are the stuff from which a life is fashioned and refashioned. Such are this author’s telic (final) reflections . . . statements . . . words — not, we hope, his last.

NOTES
1. The subtitle of Signifying Acts is Structure and Meaning in Everyday Life. To make my earlier point, it is as much about “everyday life” as it is about theories of everyday life.
2. The citations “eddies in the ongoing current” and “a logically and poetically and rhetorically constituted concept” are from The Presence of Self (2000:276–77). This latest work on the self, while consistent with all of the author’s other works, shows the important and continuing influence of Kenneth Burke (particularly on rhetoric and identity) as well as the thinking of Mikhail Bakhtin and Paul Ricoeur. For “eddies in the ongoing current” the author refers us to Mead (1934:182).
3. In 1984, I was still a newcomer to the SSSI and knew neither Fred Davis nor Robert Perinbanayagam. But I can still recall watching and listening to Fred Davis—president of SSSI—as he introduced Perinbanayagam’s Master Lecture. I was greatly impressed by this man who communicated an excitement about insights and ideas without the usual reserve so characteristic of academics.
4. "It is absurd," Mead wrote, "to look at the mind simply from the standpoint of the individual" (1934:223 n25). If mind exists anywhere at all, it exists in a field that lies between ourselves and our worlds (Mead [1922] 1964:247; cf. 1938:372; 1934:133, 329, 332). Hans Joas (1993:23) has effectively argued that through the theory of self-reflexiveness or self-consciousness Mead sought to "reconstruct pragmatistically the legacy of German idealism."

5. The ontological and epistemological presuppositions of pragmatism and symbolic interactionism—including the idea of reality in the making—are the subject matter of the important study and article by Dmitri N. Shalin (1986).


REFERENCES


