

INTRODUCTION

Ragnar Rommetveit: His Work and Influence

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Over the past 3 decades, the writings of Ragnar Rommetveit have had a major impact on scholars from several disciplines as well as continents. For many of us, his writings have been the source of continuing inspiration, and we return to them again and again, each time to find yet one more layer of meaning and insight.

Instead of being a facile and prolific writer, Rommetveit has always been painstaking and meticulous in producing his writings, several of which have never been published and some of which have been destroyed because they did not live up to the standards he set for himself. Modesty has always made him view his efforts as being capable of yielding only partial success and as being the source of more questions than answers. Although the contributors to this special issue of *Mind, Culture, and Activity* may agree with the latter, we take this to be an accomplishment rather than a shortcoming. The fact that we have chosen to revisit Rommetveit's ideas once again reflects the admiration we have for his quest to understand meaning, language, and mind. But perhaps even more than this, it reflects the inspiration he has provided for those struggling with these issues.

As is the case for many serious thinkers, there are elements of change and growth, as well as elements of continuity, in Rommetveit's writings. As Bente Eriksen Hagtvet and Astri Heen Wold (this issue) note, he has been influenced throughout his career by his early experience as a speaker of a minority dialect of Norwegian, an experience that made him something of an outsider to the modern, mainstream dialect of his country. Instead of taking this to be grounds for resentment and retreat, however, he has always taken it as a source of pride and of motivation to delve into what it means to communicate across one of the countless divides that separate humans from one another.

Perhaps reflecting this linguistic background, and also the Scandinavian penchant for appreciating solitude, Rommetveit began his study of mind, meaning, and communication with an observation that is unusual—at least for many of us in North America who so blithely approach matters from an opposing, yet unexamined stance. Rather than assuming that communication is the natural and seemingly easy process we often take it to be, he begins with the wonderment that comes

from recognizing a pluralistic world. For him, communication must be problematized rather than assumed, and it must never be considered to be a matter of the simple transmission of information from speaker to listener. Instead, it is a process of building a fragile, temporary, and partially shared intersubjectivity in a deeply pluralistic world.

These basic ideas have been at the root of Rommetveit's thoughts for decades and are reviewed and elaborated by himself and the other contributors in what follows. His profound explication of them and their implications would be enough to ensure a long-lasting influence in psychology, semiotics, sociolinguistics, and other disciplines. What is perhaps most estimable, however, is that he has never been satisfied with his formulations. Instead, he continues to struggle with what it means for humans to communicate, and he continues to do so in a manner that turns up new insights—and questions—at every step along the way.

In his most recent writings and conversations, Rommetveit has focused increasingly on issues having to do with the ethical stances inherent in communication—including those that surface in the study of communication itself. His article in what follows is largely taken up with this topic, and Hagtvet and Wold (this issue) delve into the transformations he has undergone over his career in this regard. Among other things, they note that his concern with the plurality of human perspectives has not led him to take up a position of postmodern relativism. In his customary manner, Rommetveit freely admits that this is a potential problem, but as Hagtvet and Wold note, he seeks to avoid it by grounding his argument in the dynamics of dialogue.

Per Linell has long been concerned with a related set of concerns. Many of his studies have focused on communication that involves parties of different status and power (e.g., in police interrogations), and in pursuing this issue, he has done a great deal to extend the insights implicit in Rommetveit's basic ideas about pluralism in human life and communication. In the article by Eduardo F. Mortimer and James V. Wertsch in this issue, other dimensions of Rommetveit's insights are mined in order to make sense of intersubjectivity in pedagogical settings. Here again, the brilliant insights that Rommetveit has provided lay the groundwork for understanding complex forms of discourse and how they are shaped by the cultural tools available in a sociocultural setting. And Hagtvet and Wold allude to other forms of research and practice in special education that probably would never have come into existence without the impetus provided by Rommetveit's writings.

What is striking about the articles by Linell, Hagtvet and Wold, and Mortimer and Wertsch is that they all are attempts to spell out, extend, and apply ideas that Rommetveit outlined in his writings at some point earlier in his career. As already noted, these earlier writings constitute a rich corpus of ideas that could be mined for some time to come. However, in his ceaseless quest to puzzle through new aspects of long-standing questions, Rommetveit himself has moved on—ahead of us. His struggle to understand the ethical dimensions of communication, including the communication involved in the study of communication, represents his newest project.

Years ago, the renowned social psychologist and epistemologist Donald Campbell quipped, "For Ragnar, to think is an ethical act" (D. Campbell, personal communication, 1978). Campbell said this in a moment of gentle, affectionate humor, but his comment has remained with me and now seems more relevant and serious than ever. For in his most recent writings, Rommetveit is raising profound questions about the role and responsibilities of researchers in the human sciences. Going back to the classic Dilthey–Ebbinghaus controversy in psychology, he reviews some of the research that has been conducted over the past few decades in psychology and linguistics, and he forces us to examine the issue of just how we, as researchers, treat the "subjects" in our

studies. Inspired by figures as diverse as Voloshinov and Bakhtin in literary analysis to Gadamer in hermeneutics to Bråten in infant socialization research, Rommetveit suggests that the study of communication—in all its disciplinary guises—has to be understood as involving an “I-thou” rather than an “I-it” relationship.

The particular incarnation of this line of reasoning found in Rommetveit’s article in this issue of *Mind, Culture, and Activity* remains very much focused on research in psychology and related disciplines. For those of us who know him, however, there is little doubt that this concern with ethics and human decency stems from a larger set of concerns. These are concerns that grow out of a life path in which someone coming from a beautiful but isolated fishing village in western Norway ventured out into a wider and increasingly pluralistic world. At the same time, this was someone who never lost touch with his origins and with those who chose not to cross over into the pluralistic landscape in which he has traveled. Some of the elements in Rommetveit’s thinking remain rooted in his early experience and come through in his return to the ethical dimension of what it is that we do—and should do. Other elements reflect the new voices and problems he continues to encounter with an open and inquiring mind. The mix is one that has inspired many of us from around the world and one that we will be striving to catch up to for years to come.

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