SOCIOCULTURAL DIMENSIONS OF LANGUAGE USE

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Sociocultural Dimensions of Language Use

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LANGUAGE, THOUGHT, AND CULTURE: *Advances in the Study of Cognition*

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Foreword

JOHN J. GUMPERZ

The development of communicative technology in recent decades, improvements in means of travel, and the explosive growth in factual knowledge about the variety of human beliefs and behavior patterns are forcing a major reorientation in social science. There is increasingly less justification for the classic ethnographic approach to human populations as isolated, self-contained, and culturally uniform units. Traditional disciplinary boundaries are shifting. Anthropologists can no longer be regarded exclusively as specialists in and interpreters of the customs of geographically remote, informally organized peoples, differing in kind from peoples living in politically and economically complex societies. As we gain information about the quality of interaction in previously little-known groups, the old dichotomies between primitive and civilized cultures, developed and underdeveloped societies, are losing their meaning. Yet, when we apply some of the insights gained from the study of exotic groups to the societies we know, we find that underneath the taken-for-granted facts of everyday life there is much that is problematic about the effect of culture and social relations on our own behavior. There are many deeper issues we tend to gloss over that require new forms of investigation.

Anthropologists, accordingly, are moving more and more into the study of well-known urbanized societies and are beginning to apply the principles developed in the analysis of lesser-known cultures to deal with specialized subjects quite similar to those ordinarily covered by other social science disciplines. Topics such as social mobility in urban society, interethnic and interclass relations, urban politics, population migration, enterpreneurship, the development of modern religions, and class and ethnic differences in language or dialect have now become common topics of anthropological research. Research techniques of related

disciplines are being adopted, and new interdisciplinary fields are developing.

Yet if there is one characteristic that distinguishes the anthropological approach to these common topics from that of other disciplines, it is the focus on ritual and sociocultural constraints on behavior. No matter what seemingly reasonable, utilitarian justification members might give for their practices, the anthropologist tends to see behavior as having both rational, or goal-oriented, as well as conventionalized, arbitrary, and culture-bound components. It is the clarification of the role of ritualized, routinized, unconscious, and often glossed-over aspects of behavior, of the way they enter into everyday instructional tasks, that best characterizes the anthropologist's contribution to our understanding of human society and the role of language in it.

Still, while the term *ritual* has survived the shift in research focus from little-known to well-known societies, the definition of the concept, the specification of what aspects of behavior can be seen as ritual, and our notion of the place of ritual practices in human life have changed radically. The early nineteenth-century anthropologists were mainly explorers, missionaries, and colonial administrators, intent on comparing what they saw abroad with what they had learned as part of their own backgrounds. They tended to see human society primarily in an evolutionary perspective and were interested in locating the customs of unknown groups in reference to their own society's scale of development. In their descriptions, they naturally focused on the types of activities that were most different from what they knew, assuming that what seemed familiar required no special explanation. Among the striking phenomena they noted were the prevalence of seemingly purposeless types of activities, which appeared unrelated to what they regarded the main tasks of productive endeavor to be. The term *ritual* was, in these early descriptions, largely a cover term to catalog practices that the anthropologist could not understand in other terms.

Turn-of-the-century Durkheimian social theory marks a major paradigmatic shift away from the study of primitive societies within a Western frame of reference towards the systematic analysis of social groups in their own terms. The basis of Durkheim's sociology is the analytical distinction drawn between the social and the individual, and between the sacred and the profane (Aron, 1970). Social systems are seen as independent structures, different from, and to some extent independent of, the sum of individual group members' behavior. These structures are made up of functionally related social elements or components and sustained by a system of cultural values or beliefs. The term *sacred*

refers to the institutions and values that function to sustain and reaffirm the cohesiveness and separation of the group. *Profane* refers to the aspects of society that function to fulfill practical, everyday goals. Ritual activity is the part of human activity that relates the individual to the social and cultural, that demonstrates how the social and cultural intermesh in human behavior. *Ritual,* here, serves as an abstract explanatory concept; it does not refer to a particular type of concrete act. What early anthropologists saw as strange practices, relics of man's past, attributable to superstition or strange forms of religious beliefs, now become the key to what is social in human groups and to the maintenance of their functional integrity.

With the breakdown of social boundaries in all parts of the globe, it can no longer be maintained that social acts are dependent on the existence of some territorially bounded population aggregate. Yet it is, nevertheless, true that human activity, to the extent that it communicates, is always constrained by shared norms. There has been a shift in emphasis, therefore, from the notion of group as the ultimate referent of social activity to more detailed study of social relations of various types, and of the shared values and unspoken assumptions they reflect. Similarly, the dichotomy between sacred and profane can no longer be taken as absolute. Few aspects of society are usually sacred or wholly profane, few activities wholly ritual. Edmond Leach (1954), in fact, defines ritual activity as the component of human acts that cannot be seen to contribute to some rationally defined goal. Mary Douglas (1966) points to the pervasiveness of ritual components in everyday human practices, such as those surrounding bodily functions, dietary habits, cleanliness conventions, and the like. She shows that these are historically relatable to similar customs in earlier civilization and equivalent to many found in modern tribal societies. Douglas' view of ritual is reminiscent of that of many psychoanalysts, who argue that the ritualized, repetitive actions of an individual's everyday routine serve to sustain personality. She sees ritual aspects of daily activities as functioning to maintain social boundaries and preserve the separation between spheres of activities and different types of cultural values. What ritual does, then, is to create a common kind of reality for those who, by virtue of their background, follow similar practices. It leads actors to define phenomena in similar ways and to reinforce social ties with those who act as they do.

The disappearance of the old polar distinctions between sacred and profane, ritual and everyday acts, along with the expansion in geographical scope of anthropological research, gives rise to serious empirical problems. If ritual is an integral aspect of most human acts, how do we

explain the working of ritual processes, how do we identify the ritual components of behavior in our own as well as in other societies? Recent work in symbolic anthropology is, in large part, concerned with these questions. Much of the impetus for this work derives from Levi-Strauss' studies of cultural symbolism in myth and folk narratives. Levi-Strauss deals with symbolism as a kind of language, analyzable in terms of its own abstract logic and grammarlike rules (Rossi, 1974). Like linguistic phenomena of other kinds, symbols can be studied at two levels: the level of abstract underlying features and the level of surface realization in context. Underlying structures consist of relatively simple, largely universal logical primitives, that is, features that can be found to be common to human acts everywhere. Surface realizations are complex and culturally specific. As Chomsky has shown for grammar, the contrast between the two levels of structure enables us to account both for pan-human and for particular aspects of symbolism, and to suggest an explanation for creativity in communication by showing how new forms can be created through recombinations and transformations of underlying features.

While Levi-Strauss' analysis deals mainly with the logic of symbolic systems, others, notably Turner (1969) and Geertz (1966), are more directly concerned with the problem posed by Durkheim: the question of how acts function to relate the individual to the social and the cultural. Ritual processes are here analyzed in terms of the metaphorical ties that connect particular acts to their other kinds of experiences. Culture is seen as a system of metaphorical associations that link together different kinds of reality. Through ritual the individual affirms his ties with that system.

A great deal has been done in recent years to explain the structuring of cultural symbols and to clarify the nature of ritual practices. Yet the actual signaling process that gives rise to the association between context-bound acts and abstract symbols has hardly begun to be examined. It is by no means clear, for example, to what extent symbolic processes are grammar-like. Where symbolic analysis deals only with myth or with narrative themes expressed in words, as in Levi-Strauss' work, and where analysis focuses on abstract logical structure, the parallel to language is not hard to justify. But cultural symbols and ritual acts are in large part nonverbal. Although it is, perhaps, true that shared meaning and shared perceptions are ultimately communicated through language, a single iconic symbol can stand for a variety of linguistic realizations. There is no one way to relate such an icon, by any one grammatical algorithm, to any one set of words that might be employed to describe its effect.

Consider, moreover, the case of magical formulas or ritual texts that are verbal. These are, of course, readily analyzed grammatically and semantically. Yet their meaning—if we define meaning as the effect of a message on those to whom it is addressed—is quite distinct—in fact, often directly opposed to the overt literal sense of constituent sentences. Until quite recently, modern linguistics dealt only with the literal sense of isolated sentences, and our theories of grammar, especially those of Chomsky and of most other theoretical linguists, reflect this limitation. The questions of speaker's interpretation of context-bound messages and of the role of grammatical rules in this interpretation are still, in large part, unresolved. There is considerable controversy among linguists as to whether grammatical theory is capable of dealing with this issue. Until we learn more about speaking practices in a variety of settings, there is little hope of resolving the conflict.

In an effort to remedy the almost complete lack of attention to the facts of language usage, ethnographers of communication have launched a detailed set of studies dealing with speaking in culturally specific settings (Hymes, 1972). Because of the almost complete lack of data in this area, most work has concentrated on the discovery and description of speech events in a range of literate and preliterate societies throughout the world. As more descriptions become available, it can be shown that in all societies there exist speech events that are marked off from everyday verbal behavior by special rules of speaking. The differences in question are not simply matters of choice of words and topics, but involve a complex set of interrelated factors, including selection of pronunciation and grammatical alternates, intonation and speech rhythm, discourse structures, as well as constraints on social roles enacted by speakers and listeners, and constraints on setting. Constraints on performance structure in speech events are both paradigmatic, where they apply to selection among alternates, and syntagmatic, where they apply to the sequential order in which passages occur. In this sense, rules of speaking seem akin to the grammatical rules applying to the production of sentences. We have reason to suppose, therefore, that there exists a level of structure that operates in the realm of discourse and is analytically separate from the grammar of individual sentences. Communicative competence, that is, the ability to speak appropriately, implies a knowledge both of grammar and of rules of language usage. What Chomsky sees as human creativity—the speaker's freedom to create new sentences by innovative use of grammatical rules—is not simply a matter of free choice limited only by instrumental considerations of what the speaker wants to accomplish; it is also subject to social and ritual constraints. Potentially,

therefore, the study of rules of speaking in communicative events could shed important new light on the relation of instrumental and noninstrumental factors in behavior.

Yet a number of problems remain. Most of our data so far apply to formal speech situations such as ceremonial gatherings, public performances, verbal games, and similar events, generally seen as separate from everyday interaction. The goal in collecting the data was to construct grammars of such formal events, to develop systems of sociolinguistic rules that would predict the incidence of linguistic forms from a knowledge of social norms and grammatical constraints. Less attention has been paid to the semantic implications of the concept of speech event. In their concern with structure, investigators sometimes tend to overemphasize the constraints that cultural norms play on language usage. They assume that the relevant social norms are known, or at least subject to study by conventional ethnographic methods. Thus, they fail to deal with the issues that have led others, including the less linguistically inclined symbolic anthropologists, to question the a priori nature of social categories and to stress the role of ritual in generating shared perceptions of reality and in both reshaping and reaffirming existing social bonds. While ethnography of communication has shown that the study of what Blount calls the realities of speech behavior can lead to some important insights into the role of social factors in the communication process, there is still a major gap between sociolinguistic description and symbolic analysis of social phenomena. A great deal of work remains to be done in the way of examining existing approaches to verbal data and questioning basic concepts if we are to develop empirical analyses of speaking capable of dealing with social symbolism in everyday communication.

The studies in this volume can be seen as a step in this direction. Following the tradition established in the ethnography of communication, analysis concentrates on verbal behavior in an actual context. Data consist of detailed ethnographic observations or tape recordings. But the basic approach to analysis leans heavily on ethnographic semantics. The focus is on the perceptual cues that speakers utilize in the categorization of speech context and on the semantic structures these reflect, rather than on attempts to relate the incidence of linguistic forms to social norms.

Ethnographic semantic analysis of terminological systems during the 1960s has shown that categorization of environmental cues into words is culturally specific (Tyler, 1969). Given any set of environmental cues, a speaker's cultural background will lead him to focus on certain features as significant, leaving others unnamed. For example, the continuous

color spectrum may be split into a finite number of discrete categories, or the infinite gradations of plant and animal species in the environment may be grouped in terms of a limited few categories. Once terminological systems are established, they then affect the ease with which environmental features can be talked about. Thus, if a culture has certain color terms such as *red* and *yellow* but not others, it is these colors that are most quickly identified. Other intermediate hues, such as orange, can be noticed and, if necessary, identified by compound phrases. Unless, however, specificity is required, speakers are likely to talk about orange as a kind of yellow or a kind of red. In that sense, although they will not affect what a person sees or hears, terminological systems shape the communication of a shared perception. Verbal categories become conventionalized ways of communicating environmental cues, but they are only imperfect representations of reality. They tend to maintain themselves because of the need for communication with others, unless new circumstances arise to force recategorizations.

Most discussion in the area of ethnographic semantics has so far centered on such areas as kinship terminologies, botanical classification, zoology, etc., in which facts are easily obtainable. But some scholars, notably Frake (1964, 1972) and his students, have begun to apply similar techniques to the study of terms for speaking. The analysis here focuses on the isolation of verbal categories for differing kinds of speaking, examining local meanings of terms like *discussion, argument, chat,* and the like. The goal, as Frake puts it, is "to formulate the conditions under which it is congruous, neither humorous nor deceitful, to state that one is engaged in the speech activity in question. These conditions constitute the semantic characteristics of the activity [1972]."

Yet, unlike names for objects and animals that are identified and categorized by features subject to physical measurement, speakers' identification of named speech activities is based, in large part, on speech itself. Although, as pointed out earlier, such activities are constrained by setting and by socially imposed limitations on participants' roles, these are rarely the only determining factors. To distinguish between a discussion, an argument, and a chat, for example, we listen primarily to what is being said and how it is said. Apart from message content, voice qualities, rhythm and speed of articulation, and choice among lexical and phonological and other stylistic options also play an important role. Language communicates at two levels of meaning. As Bateson (1972) puts it, "It simultaneously communicates content and about content."

The use of language to communicate about content is one of the main themes of this volume. Frake's work isolates the lexical categories that segment the living space in and around a Yakan residence. He shows how

these are related to social conventions governing entry into another's house, as well as the conventions governing courtship ritual. The same lexical categories when used in a description of a young man's entrance into his prospective bride's house become a metalanguage metaphorically depicting the stages of the courtship ritual and the characteristics of the individual's acting in it. Sanches uses a similar approach in her study of Japanese narrative performances. In this study, the narrator creates a context of symbolic association by his use of words, dialect variants, rhetorical strategies, and linguistic ettiquette, which sustains his performance. The study by Gumperz and Herasimchuk of a series of elementary school classroom teaching sessions shows how speakers signal basic activities, or "communicative tasks," such as "instructing," "conversing," "playing," and so on through speech. They point out that different individuals use different linguistic devices for signaling similar activities. Children, for example, tend to rely on stress, rhythm, and intonation, while adults use lexicalized phrases to signal what they are doing.

Rosaldo's study of the verbal form of hunting spells takes up a theme very close to that of traditional symbolic anthropology. From the point of view of their referential content, such spells take the form of random evocations of plant and animal names. Yet they are linked by virtue of the human qualities the culture associates with them. When they are listed together and spoken with the rhythmic and stylistic features of magical spells, the effect is to create metaphoric associations among different realms of experience and, thus, to create the context for the successful carrying out of the activity covered by the spell.

Terms for kinds of speaking, when seen in these terms, are members' semantic classifications of context that serve to segment the stream of human interaction into a limited, discrete, and culturally specific number of categories. Identification of stretches of speech as belonging to one or another of these categories is always a matter of matching form with content. It is not enough to simply refer to certain activities. The message must be couched in the proper form and must utilize conventionalized metalinguistic cues. It is the culturally specific association between form and content that generates the relevant symbolic associations.

The verbal categorization of context functions much like the verbal categorization of physical objects in channeling communication and guiding perception of reality. Once an activity is labeled, this labeling plays a significant role in the interpretation process. Agar explains a significant aspect of this phenomenon in his reconstruction of the cognitive world of drug addicts. Through enactment of typical drug scenes, he shows that the drug process involves several stages. These stages are

sequentially linked so that enactment of any one stage implies expectations of what must have preceded and what is to follow.

The study by Sacks illustrates the conventional nature of communicated truth as opposed to absolute "truth values." He discusses a simple saying, "Everyone has to lie," reminiscent of sentences like "The king of France is bald," which were made famous through philosophical discussion of truth value. The use of the term *lie* in the context "has to" suggests that truth is a socially defined concept that must be interpreted relevant to certain norms of speaking or choices of what can be said. Without such social constraints on the meaning and use of words, conversation would not be possible at all. The very cooperative nature of interaction processes, therefore, requires some limitation on perception of reality.

Writing in a similar vein, Cook-Gumperz reexamines data on language socialization to suggest that the child's recognition of the need to cooperate, interact with, and influence others is prior to the acquisition of linguistic skills. Before the child begins to speak in sentences, he must learn certain basic principles of interaction. The development of other, more sophisticated metalinguistic uses of languages is, similarly, a function of the development of interactional rules. Kernan and Mitchell-Kernan deal with the developmental aspects of one kind of act: insulting. Insulting requires both cultural knowledge of the kinds of descriptions that count as insults and linguistic knowledge of proper verbal forms of insulting. Acquisition of both types of knowledge is subject to developmental constraints.

Note that the notion of "social factors in speech" that emerges from these studies is quite different from the conventional notion. Social factors and contextual factors are seen as underlying constraints on the interpretation of messages. They affect the way an individual interprets messages. This suggests that by studying the meanings speakers assign to sentences in context and by comparing different interpretations of similar events, we can study the effect of social constraints on verbal behavior in somewhat the same way that the linguist can show the effect of grammatical constraints. Particular interpretations of messages can then be seen as a result of both semantic phenomena and unverbalized social presuppositions applied to the interpretation of sentences. Selby's criticism of psychological attribution theory is an instance of this type of analysis. Selby shows that incidents, statements, and decisions that are seen in our culture as reflecting personality characteristics are explained in quite different terms by Zapotec Indians in Mexico. This difference in the way we interpret an incident is a matter of social norms. Given the fact that Zapotec Indians and American psychologists have different

unverbalized social assumptions, they will also be led to give different interpretations of similar verbal events.

Treatment of social and contextual factors in communication in semantic forms also accounts for speakers' creative use of these factors to accomplish communicative ends. There are two aspects to this type of creativity: the use of language to create a context for the interpretation of what is said, as discussed earlier, or the metaphoric extension of constraints on performance to channel messages or convey information about participants in speech activity. This latter metaphoric use of social and contextual constraints is an important theme in several studies. Blount discusses the interplay of factual elements and social strategies in the construction of genealogies among the Luo of Eastern Africa. Genealogies are indisputable only up to a certain minimal depth. Beyond that point, when facts are in doubt, their construction becomes a matter of group negotiation; they are a way of ranking the individual within the social system, and factionalism and individual prestige play an important role in the outcome. Brukman shows the individual history in devising appropriate joking strategies. He then goes on to demonstrate that once the question and response pattern characteristic of joking is established, it can be used to trick a joking partner that leads to a compromising response. Stross applies the distinction between form and content to the analysis of creativity in song performance.

A final question, the problem of the formal aspects of symbolic communication, is touched on by Werner et al. in their analysis of schizophrenic speech. The authors draw a distinction between two semantic processes: syllogistic reasoning, in which meaning is a conclusion derived from a series of propositions by a process of logical entailment, and metaphor, in which categories are associated by virtue of the fact that they are seen to have shared qualities. Traditional grammatical semantic analysis has dealt with language only in terms of the former process, although what is deviant about schizophrenic speech is the aberrant use of metaphor. Werner's distinction suggests a partial answer to the question of the parallels between grammatical rules and symbolic processes. Symbolic processes are grammarlike to the extent that they are automatic and take place below the level of conscious awareness. Yet they differ from grammatical rules in that they rely on both syllogistic reasoning and metaphoric association for the creation of meaning.

The studies in this volume do not constitute a theory of ritual and social communication; given the present state of our knowledge, such a theory would be, perhaps, premature. They do, however, present important implications for empirical research on ritual and social elements in speech. A number of the phenomena discussed, particularly issues of

content and the role of speech functions as "instructing," "joking," and the like have been treated elsewhere in the linguistic and psycholinguistic literature. What is different about the present approach is the suggestion that these phenomena are treated as communicated semantic categories, that the signs by which they are signaled are culturally variable, and that their identification by speakers is subject to the same laws of perception and categorization that govern the assignment of lexical labels to features of the environment and of phonemic categories to sound. If we assume that ritual communication achieves its effect through the creation of contexts for the interpretation of signs, that interpretation takes the form of metaphoric associations of sentences to activities, and that these associations are mediated through metalinguistic signs, then the systematic analysis of these signs, and of their role in speakers' communicative strategies, could throw new light on the effect of social rules on behavior and clarify a number of problems of cross-cultural communication.

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