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978-0-521-29052-4 - Culture and Communication: The Logic by which Symbols are Connected

Edmund Leach

Excerpt

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Introduction

The presumed average reader of this essay is an undergraduate who is just beginning to make contact with the literature of social anthropology. Some such potential readers, and perhaps some of their teachers as well, are very likely to be put off by the formalism and superficial difficulty of the argument in the opening sections, so I must justify my presentation.

Many years ago I incurred the odium of senior anthropological colleagues by daring to suggest that other people's ethnography is often very dull. I was misunderstood but I persist in my heresy.

The work of the social anthropologist consists in the analysis and interpretation of ethnographic fact, customary behaviour as directly observed. The most fundamental way in which the procedures of modern anthropologists differ from those of their predecessors a hundred years ago is that the modern treatment of ethnographic evidence is always functionalist. Today, every detail of custom is seen as part of a complex; it is recognised that details, considered in isolation, are as meaningless as isolated letters of the alphabet. So ethnography has ceased to be an inventory of custom, it has become the art of thick description; the intricate interweaving of plot and counterplot as in the work of a major novelist (Geertz (1973)).

And if we grant that, it is plain that no detail of an anthropologist's own fieldwork could ever seem dull; detail is the very essence. But the details of other people's fieldwork are perhaps another matter.

Only in very rare instances are anthropological monographs written in such a way that the reader can pick up a comprehensive feeling for the alien cultural environment in which the events described take place. Yet in the absence of such an atmosphere an overload of detail simply intensifies incomprehensibility.

How then should untravelled undergraduates be introduced to the mysteries of social anthropology?

The usual procedure is by means of potted ethnographies – simplified summaries such as are provided by the admirable and widely-read series 'Case Studies in Cultural Anthropology' (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc.) and by textbooks which illustrate general propositions

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by means of isolated examples lifted, out of context, from classic anthropological monographs relating to the Nuer, the Tikopia, the Tallensi, the Trobriands or what have you. Both devices are a cheat. The novice reader is misled into thinking that the facts are far less complicated than is really the case and may easily come to the conclusion that there is nothing in the subject matter of social anthropology that could not easily be understood by a child of ten.

The alternative approach which I have adopted in the present case is to assume that the only ethnography about which a novice social anthropologist is likely to have any intimate knowledge is that which derives from his or her own life experience. Of set purpose my essay contains very few examples of ethnographic fact and those that it does contain are commonplace; almost the only ethnographic monograph to which the reader is asked to pay close attention is the Bible. Instead, it is hoped that each individual reader will draw on personal experience to illustrate the argument.

By now my general thesis is becoming very familiar: culture communicates; the complex interconnectedness of cultural events itself conveys information to those who participate in those events. That granted, my purpose is to suggest a systematic procedure by which the participant observer anthropologist can set about decoding the messages embedded in the complexities which he observes. The methodology can only be seen to be useful if it is applied to complex materials. Each reader must seek out an appropriate complex of ethnographic fact for himself.

All the ideas in this essay are borrowed from others; the only thing that is original about the argument is the form in which it is cast. But the essay is about the semantics of cultural forms and since the form is my own so also is the meaning.

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1. *Empiricists and rationalists: economic transactions and acts of communication*

In this section I shall delimit my field.

As you can see from its title, the essay which I have listed in the bibliography under Mary Douglas (1972) bears directly on my theme. In comment on a famous paper concerning the seasonal life of the Eskimo published at the beginning of the century (Mauss and Beuchat (1906)) Douglas writes as follows:

‘[It] is an explicit attack on geographical or technological determinism in interpreting domestic organization. It demands an ecological approach in which the structure of ideas and of society, the mode of gaining a livelihood and the domestic architecture are interpreted as a single interacting whole in which no one element can be said to determine the other.’

Thus described, the Eskimo paper may be considered a prototype for what every British social anthropologist would like to do with the ethnographic data which fill his notebooks. In practice the monographs which anthropologists write seldom preserve this kind of balance. According to the predilections of the author we find that special stress is laid *either* on the structure of ideas, *or* on the structure of society, *or* on the mode of gaining a livelihood, and the principle that we are all the time dealing with ‘a single interacting whole’ is easily forgotten.

It is also easy to forget that contrasted predilections of individual authors are themselves part of a single interacting whole.

All social anthropologists take as their subject matter the *variety* of human culture and society, and they all assume that their task is not only to describe what the varieties are but to explain why they exist. There are many different kinds of ‘explanation’ and a preference for one kind rather than another is largely a matter of personal prejudice.

Some anthropologists evidently feel that all explanation must be in terms of cause and effect. Scholars of this sort concentrate their attention on the historical account of antecedent events. Others hold that the essence of the matter is to understand the interdependence of different parts of the system as it exists at the present time; these offer structural-functionalist explanations. For others again the object of the exercise is to show how any particular cultural institution, as

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actually observed, is only one of a set of possible permutations and combinations, some of which can also be directly observed in other cultural settings. These last offer structuralist explanations – using the term ‘structuralist’ in the sense favoured by Lévi-Strauss.

But before you can hope to explain anything you need to understand what is going on. What are the facts which need to be explained? On this issue most contemporary discussion among social anthropologists exhibits a tension between two contrasted attitudes, empiricist and rationalist.

The empiricist position is perhaps best represented by the ‘transactional’ viewpoint of Fredrik Barth (1966) which is a development from the functionalist tradition originally established by Malinowski and Raymond Firth, which in turn is quite close to the structural-functionalism of Radcliffe-Brown, Fortes and Gluckman and their many intellectual descendants. Empiricists assume that the basic task of the anthropologist in the field is to record directly-observed, face-to-face behaviours of members of a local community interacting with one another in their day-to-day activities.

This localised field of human activity is then analysed as one in which *social persons*, acting out the customary conventions associated with their particular roles and statuses, engage in economic transactions. The economic transactions carry implication for our understanding of the system of manifest political, legal and religious institutions within which the community operates. In this case, what is described as the ‘social structure’ of the system is a derivation from sets of such directly observed transactions. Empiricist anthropologists steer clear of argument about ‘the structure of ideas current within a society’ which most of them would consider to be a second order, unobservable, abstraction invented by theoreticians.

In monographs written by anthropologists who work in this empiricist (functionalist) tradition, ‘social structures’ are commonly exhibited as patterns of kinship and descent. This is simply because it is manifestly the case that, in nearly all self-perpetuating face-to-face communities, kinship relationships provide the primary network through which economic transactions can be seen to flow. In consequence kinship relations are viewed as a ‘transformation’ of economic relations.

The contrasted rationalist standpoint is prototypically represented by the work of Lévi-Strauss and by some of the later writings of Evans-Pritchard.

The rationalism in question is not that of Descartes, who believed that by following rigorous procedures of logical argument we can develop in the mind a ‘true’ model of the universe which exactly corresponds to the phenomenal objective universe which we perceive through our senses, but something closer to the ‘new science’ of Giambattista Vico, the eighteenth-century Italian philosopher, which

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recognised that the imaginative operations of human minds are 'poetic' and are not trammelled by fixed, easily specified rules of Aristotelian and mathematical logic.

Lévi-Straussian rationalists call themselves 'structuralists', but structure here refers to the structure of ideas rather than the structure of society.

Because of their interest in ideas as opposed to objective facts rationalist anthropologists tend to be more concerned with what is said than with what is done. In field research they attach particular importance to mythology and to informants' statements about what ought to be the case. Where there is discrepancy between verbal statements and observed behaviour, rationalists tend to maintain that the social reality 'exists' in the verbal statements rather than in what actually happens.

The justification for this position may be illustrated by an analogy. A Beethoven symphony 'exists' as a musical score which can be interpreted in all sorts of ways by all sorts of orchestras. The fact that a particularly incompetent performance diverges widely from the score as written does not lead us to say that the 'real' symphony was the bad performance rather than the ideal score.

In the thinking of rationalist (structuralist) social anthropologists the 'structure' of a system of social ideas bears the same sort of relationship to what actually happens as does a musical score to the performance. The score is, in a sense, the 'cause' of what happens, but we cannot work backwards and reliably infer the score from direct observation of any single performer's behaviour. In the musical case, the score originates 'in the mind' of the composer. By analogy, committed rationalists tend to write of cultural systems being composed by a kind of collectivity – 'the human mind'. From this they infer that it is necessary to study a number of contrasted empirical examples (a number of separate performances by separate orchestras) before we can be confident that we know what is the common abstract 'reality' which underlies them all.

For those who adopt this approach, the directly observed interactions between individuals, which the functionalist empiricist perceives as *economic transactions*, are reinterpreted as *acts of communication*.

But here let me remind you of what I said earlier on. The rival theories of anthropologists are themselves parts of a single interacting whole. Both viewpoints accept the central dogma of functionalism that cultural details must always be viewed in context, that everything is meshed in with everything else. In this regard the two approaches, the empiricist (functionalist) and the rationalist (structuralist), are complementary rather than contradictory; one is a transformation of the other.

According to Malinowski, the Founding Father of functionalist-

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empiricist anthropology, 'the principle of reciprocity' pervades all social behaviour. In saying this he was concerned to emphasise that the economic transactions which flow from reciprocity are socially cohesive, but he also recognised that reciprocity is a mode of communication. It not only does something, it says something.

If I give you a present you will feel morally bound to give something back. In economic terms you are in debt to me, but in communicative terms the sense of reciprocal obligation is an expression of a mutual feeling that we both belong to the same social system. Moreover, the way you reciprocate my gift will say something about our mutual relations. If you return my gift in kind by an exact equivalent, a glass of beer for a glass of beer, a greetings card for a greetings card, the behaviour expresses equality of status. But if the reciprocity involves gifts which are different in kind – I give you labour effort, you give me wages – the behaviour expresses inequality of status, employee versus employer.

And just to reinforce this point that the two anthropological viewpoints which I have here summarised as 'empiricist' and 'rationalist' are to be regarded as complementary rather than right or wrong I would emphasise that my own work includes specimen monographs of both types. Leach (1954) is rationalist in style; Leach (1961) is empiricist.

For the remainder of this essay the bias of argument will be structuralist (rationalist) rather than functionalist (empiricist). My general theme is communication; but that is simply for purposes of exposition. In practical affairs communication and economics can never be separated. Even in such a palpably symbolic communicative performance as that in which the priest in a Christian Mass offers the communicants bread and wine and declares that the bread and the wine are (respectively) the body and the blood of Jesus Christ there is an economic substratum. Someone, at some point, has to purchase the bread and wine.

However, by concentrating on the communicative aspects of transactions I can restrict the variety of parameters that I need to take into account. Within this limited frame of reference individual items of observed behaviour and individual details of custom can be treated as analogous to the words and sentences of a language, or passages in a musical performance.

In the case of ordinary language or ordinary musical performance any particular 'utterance' has originated in a human mind and the central puzzle is to determine how far the 'meaning' which is conveyed to the listener is the same as that which was intended by the originator. My present concern is to discuss how anthropologists, as observers, should set about the business of deciding what customs, other than verbal customs, can be said to 'mean'.

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If we are to discuss this matter in other than the most general terms it is necessary to develop an artificial formal frame of reference; we must approach the issue almost as if it were a problem in mathematics. So the next three Sections of this book will be devoted to developing a jargon apparatus, a framework of concepts, which can serve as tools of analysis. If you are not used to argument which is presented in this formal schematic way you are likely to be put off. All that I can say in defence of such procedure is that it works. If you can accustom yourself to handling ethnographic evidence in the way I suggest you will find that many things will become comprehensible which had previously appeared to be just a chaos of random images.

2. *Problems of terminology*

When we are in the company of close friends and neighbours we all take it for granted that communication is a complex continuous process which has many non-verbal as well as verbal components. It is only when we meet with strangers that we suddenly become aware that, because all customary behaviours (and not just acts of speech) convey information, we cannot understand what is going on until we know the code. How then should we set about decoding other people's customs?

We can usefully distinguish three aspects of human behaviour:

- (1) *natural biological activities of the human body* – breathing, heart-beat, metabolic process and so on;
- (2) *technical actions*, which serve to alter the physical state of the world out there – digging a hole in the ground, boiling an egg;
- (3) *expressive actions*, which either simply say something about the state of the world as it is, or else purport to alter it by meta-physical means.

Besides ordinary verbal utterances, expressive actions obviously include gestures, such as nodding the head, pulling faces and waving the arms, but they also include such behaviours as wearing a uniform, standing on a dais, and putting on a wedding ring.

My three *aspects* of behaviour are never completely separable. Even the act of breathing is 'expressive' – it 'says' that I am still alive. Even the simplest technical action has both biological and expressive implication. If I make myself a cup of coffee it not only alters the state of the world out-there, it also stimulates my internal metabolic processes, and it 'says' something. The way I prepare the coffee and the instruments which I use in the process give information about my cultural background.

The modes and channels through which we communicate with one another are very diverse and very complex but as a first approximation, for purposes of initial analysis, I shall assert that:

Human communication is achieved by means of expressive actions which operate as *signals*, *signs* and *symbols*. Most of us do not distinguish these three commonplace words at all precisely, and even

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those who do may use them in widely different ways,* but in this essay they will be given specially defined meanings which I shall presently spell out.

In some forms of communication the expressive action of the sender is directly interpreted by the receiver. I speak, you listen; I nod my head, you see me do so. But in other cases the link is indirect. I write a letter and produce a pattern of signs and symbols on a piece of paper; some time later you receive the paper and interpret what I wrote.

The scope of indirect communication of this latter sort is very wide. We spend our whole time interpreting the results of the past expressive actions of other people. I can recognise that a church is not just an ordinary dwelling house simply by looking at it, but the 'expressive actions' which built in the distinction in the first place took place a long time ago.

In what follows I shall assume that *all* the various non-verbal dimensions of culture, such as styles in clothing, village lay-out, architecture, furniture, food, cooking, music, physical gestures, postural attitudes and so on are organised in patterned sets so as to incorporate coded information in a manner analogous to the sounds and words and sentences of a natural language. I assume therefore it is just as meaningful to talk about the grammatical rules which govern the wearing of clothes as it is to talk about the grammatical rules which govern speech utterances.

Clearly this is a very sweeping kind of assumption and I shall not

- * The technical literature on this topic is very large and reaches back for several centuries. The most frequently cited 'authorities' are C. S. Peirce, F. de Saussure, E. Cassirer, L. Hjelmslev, C. Morris, R. Jakobson, R. Barthes. These authors ring the changes with the terms *sign*, *symbol*, *index*, *signal*, *icon*, with very little agreement as to how the categories should be related but with ever increasing complexity of argument. Firth (1973) follows Peirce and Morris in making *sign* a box category within which *symbol*, *signal*, *index* and *icon* are subdivisions. I have preferred the schema set out in Fig. 1 (p. 12) which is based on Mulder and Hervey (1972). Here *symbol* and *sign* are contrasted sub-sets of *index*. I have rejected Firth's usage because I need to take account of the major insights of de Saussure, Jakobson and Barthes. I have modified Mulder and Hervey, partly because I need a terminology which can be adapted to non-verbal as well as verbal communication, and partly I am more concerned to achieve comprehensibility than total rigour of argument. References to the authors mentioned above will be found in the Bibliography. Another helpful guide in this terminological maze is Fernandez (1965, 917-22); (1974).

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attempt to justify it in detail. The basic argument is that the messages which we receive in different modes (through our various senses of touch, sight, hearing, smell, taste etc.) are readily transformed into other modes. Thus we can visualise what we hear in words; we can convert written texts into speech; a musician can transform the visual patterns of a musical score into movements of the arms, mouth and fingers. Evidently, at some deeply abstract level, all our different senses are coded in the same way. There *must* be some kind of 'logical' mechanism which allows us to transform sight messages into sound messages or touch messages or smell messages, and vice versa.

However, it is also important to recognise that there are major differences between the way individuals convey information to one another by the use of ordinary speech and by the written word, and the way we communicate with one another by coded conventions of non-verbal behaviour and non-verbal signs and symbols.

The grammatical rules which govern speech utterances are such that anyone with a fluent command of a language can generate spontaneously entirely new sentences with the confident expectation that he will be understood by his audience. This is *not* the case with most forms of non-verbal communication. Customary conventions can only be understood if they are familiar. A private symbol generated in a dream or in a poem, or a newly invented 'symbolic statement' of a non-verbal kind, will fail to convey information to others until it has been explained by other means. This shows that the syntax of non-verbal 'language' must be a great deal simpler than that of spoken or written language. Indeed, were this not the case, a short essay such as this on such a complex theme would be a complete waste of time.

So in reading what follows you need to remember that there is only an analogic similarity between the generation of new sentences by an individual engaged in spontaneous discourse and the generation of new customs by a cultural community over a period of time. In point of fact we understand very little about either.

My starting point is arbitrary. Let us call any unit of communication a 'communication event'. Any such event is dyadic (two-faced) in at least two senses:

- (i) There must always be two individuals: X, the 'sender', the originator of the expressive action, and Y, the 'receiver', the interpreter of the product of the expressive action. X and Y may be in the same place at the same time or they may not.
- (ii) The expressive action itself always has two aspects, simply because it transmits a message. On the one hand there is the action itself or the product of the action, the nodding of the head or the written letter, on the other there is the message which is encoded by the sender and decoded by the receiver.