

Language and self- transformation

A study of the Christian conversion narrative

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Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1993

First published 1993

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data

Stromberg, Peter G.

Language and self-transformation: a study of the Christian
conversion narrative / Peter G. Stromberg.

p. cm. – (Publications of the Society for Psychological
Anthropology)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 44077 7 (hard cover)

1. Conversion – Case studies. 2. Language and languages – Religious
aspects – Christianity. I. Title. II. Series.

BR110.S76 1993

248.2'4 – dc20 92-34071 CIP

ISBN 0 521 44077 7 hardback

Transferred to digital printing 2003

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1 Introduction

... and then suddenly as sometimes happens in dreams, out of the corner of my eye again I saw this frieze, a frieze you know that's a stone you know with a ... sort of three dimensional ... cut, about twenty to thirty feet high [voice drops to a whisper] and on this frieze there was a picture that was a picture of a combination of Christ on the cross and a Greek athlete. Very powerful, you know what I mean? This wonderful combination of, of the Greek and the Christian. And power, you know I mean I just like it's Christ on the cross but it's not this emasculated ... this emasculating sort of thing. I'm, I'm putting my own interpretation into the dream now. And I looked at that and it was very interesting because it was very powerful and there were still in the nooks and crannies of this, of this frieze, there was straw, this was something freshly unpacked. And there were bits of straw and bits of tinfoil you know like it hadn't fully come forward yet, that there was still some junk around that I ... you know, but it was very powerful, the symbol. And then I couldn't stay in the tree any longer, the tree was kind of hollowed out and open, and one – I have a tree in my yard like that – and I found myself coming right out of the tree and with the feeling, 'ah, now I have work to do. I, I have to express this in some way.'

This is a fragment of a narrative I heard in the early 1980s in a city in California. The narrator is a man in his early fifties whom I call Jim; he is telling me about a dream he had had several years earlier, a dream that was significant in the years-long process of his return to the Christianity of his youth.

I had met Jim in the process of conducting participant observation research in a large Evangelical Christian church, and he was the first church member who offered to tell me the story of his "conversion," the experiences that re-established and solidified his Christian faith.¹ I imagine my eyes lit up as I listened to this articulate and psychologically astute man talk for nearly four hours about his "spiritual journey." This was just what I was looking for: an account of the processes whereby a set of widely shared symbols such as "Jesus Christ" and "the cross" came to have intense personal meaning for an individual believer. In grasping the connection between Jim's idiosyncratic personal experience and the language he shares with millions of other believers, I reasoned, I could

begin to understand something about the processes whereby a symbolic language such as that of Evangelical Christianity can serve as a link between a believer's deep emotional concerns and a larger community.

The stories that Jim told me fairly bristled with possibilities for this sort of analysis. He had spent years keeping journals, recording his dreams, attending personal growth seminars, and generally ruminating about his past and the possible meanings of what he called "the Christian myth" for his experience. But as I thought about Jim's narrative in the years after I had heard it, as I wrote what seemed like uncountable versions of my analysis of Jim's psychological situation and the part Christianity played in his attempts at personal transformation, I became increasingly aware of a number of problems in my underlying assumptions. Most fundamentally, how did I know that what Jim was telling me was true? This question concerned not Jim's integrity – I assume he made every attempt to cooperate and to tell his story accurately – but rather the much larger issue of the relationship between language and experience (Needham 1972). As Jim had grappled with the problem of understanding his own emotions and experience, he had discovered more or less satisfying ways of labeling that experience and giving it coherence. But this process of meticulously constructing self-understanding required that Jim emphasize some aspects of his experience while downplaying or even excising others, that he replace explanations that had earlier seemed adequate with formulations that now seemed to capture more, in general that he come to see himself in terms of a language that shaped and formed, at the same time as it represented, his experience.

I have now come to doubt my earlier assumption that any language can be assumed to simply re-present experience. I have come to suspect the conviction that behind a subject's language lies a set of events and emotions that the language transparently reflects. I see in this conviction evidence of the power of what I will call the "referential ideology" of meaning in language in American culture (see Silverstein 1979). Americans often assume that language points to an independently existing reality and that it can be used to describe that reality in terms that convey, without fundamentally distorting, its characteristics. Although such an assumption may seem little else than common sense, it is incorrect. The "pointing to a separately existing reality" assumption is wrong in part because language always shapes the reality it describes. But even more important is the fact that the process of referring to events and objects that transcend the actual event of speech is not the sole basis of meaning in language (Hanks 1990: 3). Equally important in the creation of meaning are processes of indexing; language is meaningful to speakers in part because it may reflect a situation beyond the event of speech, but also

because it creates a situation in the event of speech (see Duranti and Goodwin 1992 and sources cited there).

In this context the important point is that Jim's conversion narrative is not only or even primarily an account of events from the past, it is a creation of a particular situation in the moment of its telling. The way to look at Jim's conversion, I have come to see, is not as something that occurred in the past and is now "told about" in the conversion narrative. Rather, the conversion narrative itself is a central element of the conversion. The way around the evidential problem I mentioned above is to abandon the search for the reality beyond the convert's speech and to look instead at the speech itself, for it is through language that the conversion occurred in the first place and also through language that the conversion is now re-lived as the convert tells his tale.

On this view it is no coincidence that I encountered a remarkably high level of co-operation as I sought out believers who would be willing to tell me their conversion stories. To do so was, for these believers, not a chore but rather a central ritual of their faith. The conversion narrative offered an opportunity to celebrate and reaffirm the dual effect of the conversion, the strengthening of their faith and the transformation of their lives.² This book is an inquiry into this dual process, an attempt to understand both of these effects, and above all an inquiry into the question of why just these two changes should occur together. How does a person's increased commitment to a symbolic system such as Evangelical Christianity also enable him to understand his experience in such a way that his life seems to him to be transformed?

This question has both psychological and sociological dimensions, for to answer it would be to understand something of the therapeutic process in mental health and of the processes of adherence to the groups that are associated with symbol systems. In this book I will not address either of these processes directly, but rather will be content if I can say something quite basic about commitment and the generation of a sense of self-transformation. I will argue that such a sense is closely connected to changes in intentionality in the experience of the narrating subject, changes that are made possible by framing that experience in what I will call a "canonical language" (i.e. a set of symbols concerned with something enduring and beyond everyday reality, such as those associated with "Evangelical Christianity").

One result of this focus is that this is not a book about Evangelical Christianity, although the subjects discussed here profess some version of that faith. I have made no attempt to select a sample of informants that could be said to fairly represent some church or community, nor have I surveyed a broad range of Evangelical churches, for the simple reason that

I do not intend to make any generalizable claims about this religion. Therefore, although I hope that this work will be of some use to the many scholars who are studying conversion, the following is not intended to support claims about conversion in general.³ My primary concern is rather with how symbol use within a particular tradition can give the actor a sense of self-transformation, and with what these findings might say about how self-understanding is constructed in the larger society of which my informants are a part. This is of course not to say that the tradition that shapes believers' narratives is unimportant, so I would like to turn now to a brief background sketch on Evangelical Christianity and the conversion narrative.

Evangelical Christianity

The term "evangelical" must be understood in historical and polemical contexts. "Evangelical" takes its contemporary meaning from a long history of controversies within Christianity that concern very basic principles of faith. Although the term is used in the New Testament, its polemical significance stems from the Reformation period, when it was used first of all by Luther to contrast his form of religiosity to the more ritual and tradition-based form that characterized the Roman church (Gerstner 1975: 23). The term gained more specificity during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in the confrontation between orthodox Protestants and a new set of reformers, the Pietists (Stoeffler 1965; Stromberg 1986). Pietists varied in their particular theological emphases as much as had earlier Protestants, but a general principle of the movement was the stress on the need for an experiential faith as opposed to one based in doctrine. Pietists of all varieties, in other words, emphasized and perhaps intensified the fundamental Protestant message that it is the faith of the individual rather than the saving efficacy of the church that is necessary for a valid Christianity. In some varieties of Pietism, this experiential focus took the form of an insistence that the believer must personally undergo a "born again" experience in which his or her commitment to Christ was affirmed (Pinson 1934).

The tenet that religion must be a matter between the individual and God is closely associated with another principle in most varieties of Christianity that choose the label "Evangelical." If it is above all the experience of the individual that may create a significant link to the divine, there must be some channel, other than the church, through which God may communicate personally with the believer. In the Evangelical tradition this channel is the Bible.

It is above all in the United States that a broad religious tradition

calling itself “Evangelical” developed. The historical conditions for this development – which are described at length in James Hunter’s (1983) study of American Evangelicalism – were the increasing influence of modern ideas in realms of ethics, science and Biblical criticism. During the decades around the turn of the twentieth century, strong currents within American Protestantism, in response to such ideas, shaped a more liberal, socially active Christianity less committed to Biblical literalism than had been the case in the nineteenth century. American Fundamentalism and contemporary Evangelicalism grew out of a conservative backlash against this “New Christianity” (Hunter 1983). In contrast to that part of Protestantism that has sought to assimilate modernity, Evangelicalism has tended to continue to affirm the inspired and infallible character of the Scriptures. As expressed by a contemporary Evangelical theologian, “Scripture, as illumined by the Holy Spirit, is the only trustworthy guide in moral and spiritual matters” (Kantzer 1975: 78).

Contemporary American Evangelicalism, then, reflects a dogged attempt to defend certain basic principles of the experiential tradition in Protestantism in the face of the threat of modernity. In practice, this attempt can be summarized in three basic principles. To quote Hunter (1983: 7):

At the doctrinal core, contemporary Evangelicals can be identified by their adherence to (1) the belief that the Bible is the inerrant Word of God, (2) the belief in the divinity of Christ, and (3) the belief in the efficacy of Christ’s life, death and physical resurrection for the salvation of the human soul.

In much of the Evangelical tradition, the third principle takes the form of a stress upon the importance of an experience of commitment to Christ through a personal conversion experience. Although such an experience was not a requirement for membership at the church I studied, all church members I spoke with regarded it as an important component of faith. In practice, of course, what is required is not so much a conversion – by its nature a transformation of the soul that occurs outside of the public view – as a conversion narrative.

The question of what counts as a conversion narrative, of how the genre of the conversion narrative is defined, is unfortunately little researched. Apart from the interesting work of Patricia Caldwell (1983) on Puritan conversion narratives, I know of no detailed studies of the conversion narrative as a genre. Even worse, it is not possible to offer such an analysis based on my own data, which were not collected with such a goal in mind. Thus I cannot answer such important questions as: What counts as a conversion narrative (either in a particular group or in Evangelicalism as a whole)? How do believers learn to tell conversion narratives? Are there

variations in conversion narratives across time or social groups? Are there themes that characterize conversion stories no matter what the historical context?

These questions must await further research. For the moment, I will note only that in the very large congregation I studied, there was no “witnessing” in front of the entire congregation, a practice that would tend to shape conversion stories around a particular form. There were, on the other hand, opportunities to relate conversion stories in smaller groups such as adult Sunday school classes or with groups of friends. My impression from participating in church activities and interviewing members is that there was little pressure toward standardization of narratives, that a believer’s story of conversion was unlikely to be questioned as inadequate by other members.

Although a fuller understanding of the generic features of the conversion narrative would be helpful as background to the present work, its absence will not in any way compromise the study. My concern here is with the ways in which believers integrate a shared religious language into the idiosyncratic details of their own life histories and situations, a topic that can be studied without extensive knowledge of the generic features of the conversion story. The central task of the believer in Evangelical Christianity is, through his or her interpretation of Scripture, to find a meaningful link between the symbol system (the Bible) and his or her experience. The conversion narrative is the creation of this link through language, and it is therefore to the nature of language that I must now turn.

The referential

I want to discuss some general assumptions about language, but the situation is complicated by the fact that I will eventually argue that the conversion narrative both exists and is effective because of certain pervasive ideas about language and persons in our society, *ideas that are shared not only by the believers I will discuss but by many of the readers of this book.*⁴

These pervasive – and in my view, implausible – assumptions about language can be summarized using a term suggested by Michael Silverstein (1979), that being “linguistic ideology.” By this term Silverstein means to refer to a set of pervasive and nearly unquestionable assumptions in a culture about how language works. Such assumptions are not, as might first seem the case, only of concern to dreamy intellectuals. Rather, ideas about meaning in language inform much everyday reasoning

As noted earlier, Silverstein points out that English speakers, and

probably speakers of Indo-European languages in general, subscribe to a referential⁵ view of language.⁶ By this he means that speakers of English assume that language works because linguistic symbols – words – convey discrete and specific meanings. English speakers, in other words, foreground referential functions of language at the expense of pragmatic functions. This outlook can be observed, for example, in the conviction that communication happens because words are associated with specific referential meanings that can be clearly delineated, as they are in dictionaries.

In spite of the fact that the referential view seems unassailable, the clearest sort of common sense, it is not a very good theory of meaning-creation in language. In the first place, no philosopher or linguist has ever come up with a widely accepted account of how these referential meanings get attached to words. Second, as noted, the referential ideology considerably underplays the role of indexical processes – processes that depend upon the relationship between sign and context – in communication.

Third, the referential ideology sets up a host of philosophical problems by positing language as a medium between the ideas of a core self and an external reality. These problems have to do with the nature of the self, of external reality, and the ability of language to express either one of these. As noted, these questions do not only provide employment for philosophers, in one form or another they engage most members of our society. As I will argue at length below, how we think about persons and their place in the world is closely bound up with the referential ideology of language.

The mysteries generated by the referential ideology of language have considerable practical import, because they affect how people understand themselves, their neighbors, their societies, and their universe. The conversion narrative is one example of a ritual that attempts to address and resolve certain contradictions entailed in the referential ideology so that people can live their lives in a way they find meaningful. To study this ritual, one must remain alert to the existence and importance of the referential ideology while avoiding being drawn into its assumptions. The study of the conversion narrative must take place within the framework of an alternative view of language.

Much of philosophy and social science during this century can be seen as an attempt to construct such an alternative. Analytical philosophy after Wittgenstein's later work, ethnomethodology, and sociolinguistics are entire schools of thought dedicated in part to the task of attacking the referential ideology. However, even much of the work that has attempted to offer alternatives to the referential ideology has continued to reify referential processes under the rubric of meanings. The attack on the

referential ideology, for example, may be carried out by pointing to the importance of “indexical meaning.”

Although it is probably not possible for any work of social science, including this one, to give up the idea of meaning, it may be possible to give up the idea of meanings as mysterious essences conveyed between language-users by words. Richard Rorty (1989: 10), for example (following Donald Davidson), urges us to do this by abandoning the notion that language is a medium for expression or representation. But when one considers this suggestion, it seems unhelpful. Does Rorty really want to give up the idea that language conveys, say, ideas? Why would one write articles on language if one took such a position seriously?

The question here has to do with the idiom used to discuss meaning processes in language, for the questions one will be led to ask are closely tied to that idiom. For many purposes it may be harmless to talk about language as conveying ideas. However, language is not a mystical system that somehow links noises and gestures to specifiable mental contents, nuggets we call ideas or beliefs or meanings. Language is nothing other than human activity, in Rorty’s (1987) phrase, “familiar noises.” Humans can communicate because they are able to commit many associations to memory, but also because they are always able to modify those associations in different contexts. Communication happens, in philosopher Donald Davidson’s (1986: 442) terms, based on a temporary convergence in “passing theories” held by speaker and interpreter.

Passing theories are not the grand and systematic grammars often assumed to underlie language-use. Rather they are *ad hoc* strategies for making sense of another’s (or one’s own) behavior. A passing theory is my understanding of what you mean in a particular utterance. That theory is based upon my prior knowledge of the language we speak but it is not the same as that prior knowledge, for you might – in fact you probably will – behave in some way that is not covered by that prior knowledge. As Rorty (1989: 14) writes:

Such a theory is “passing” because it must constantly be corrected to allow for mumbles, stumbles, malapropisms, metaphors, tics, seizures, psychotic symptoms, egregious stupidity, strokes of genius, and the like.

To say that communication is dependent upon a convergence in passing theories between speaker and hearer is to say that there is never an overarching system or code which is brought by language-users into a situation and which can completely account for communication. As Davidson puts it, rather provocatively, “there is no such thing as a language, not if a language is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed” (1986: 446).

I would put it differently: Language is not the system it is presumed to be in the referential ideology. It is important to realize, however, that to say that the referential ideology is not a good explanation of language is not to deny that referential processes exist and are central to human communication. That is, it is of course true that communication depends upon largely consensual associations to familiar noises and gestures. Such a process plays a role in language, but it is not the explanation of language. English speakers are continuously tempted to *reify* one aspect of human communicative behavior – the linkage of common associations to familiar symbols – and to regard it as the *explanation* of human communicative behavior, and it is this that I am arguing against.

From this perspective, then, what appear as referential meanings are simply areas of stability in the constantly fluctuating use of communicative symbols. Once one has gotten beyond the habit of attributing to these areas a real existence, one can then grant their significance as *patterns of use*. That is, referential processes are regularities in use that are of enormous social import. Although I risk sounding hyperbolic by saying it, “the referential” is part of the very foundation of our social order. The social process that defines, from moment to moment, our continuously evolving sense of what it is possible to express defines the limits of our immediate imagination.

By “the referential” I mean to designate communicative behavior that proceeds within the confines of the familiar. The referential is, in any society, the domain of the sayable. Within these boundaries, passing theories converge to such an extent that members of the society are easily convinced that their actions express underlying realities they call “meanings.” When symbols are used in a manner that conveys a consensual meaning within a community, I will say those symbols are being used referentially.

The constitutive

Many anthropologists have identified culture with the realm of the referential, defining culture as a system of shared assumptions about and interpretations of the world. The referential could also be equated with what some philosophers have called “the realm of literal meaning.” Consider, for example, Richard Rorty (1987: 285) discussing his colleagues Davidson and Quine:

semantical notions like ‘meaning’ have [for Davidson] a role only within the quite narrow (though shifting) limits of regular, predictable, linguistic behaviour – the limits which mark off (temporarily) the literal use of language. In Quine’s image, the realm of meaning is a relatively small ‘cleared’ area within the jungle of

use, one whose boundaries are constantly being both extended and encroached upon.

In this image, the cleared area exists *within* the jungle of use. This reiterates what I have stressed above, namely that communication within the realm of the referential remains nothing other than use, nothing other than human activity. But if a group of people reifies the referential function of communicative behavior, so that meanings seem to have a real existence, the fact that all communicative behavior is ultimately nothing other than use will be obscured. In such a situation, one's interest is focused upon "what is being said" so that the activity of saying often becomes trivial. What is important is "what is said"; "how it is said" is often thought not to matter.

There are, of course, certain sorts of communicative behavior that remain visible as activity even within the referential ideology. Gesture is an example of this. I can say "that was sweet of him" while adopting an ironic expression that will be taken to invert the face-value meaning of what I am saying. Here activity matters; how I make the expression is relevant to the meaning I create. Another example is communication that occurs through symbolic systems other than verbal language. I might choose to convey the message that I am wealthy not by announcing my net worth in public gatherings but rather by purchasing an expensive automobile.

I will designate communicative behaviors that are visible as activities, in which one communicates by doing something, as "constitutive" communicative behaviors, and their properties will be central to the argument of this book.⁷ I have chosen the term constitutive because these behaviors always entail, in one way or another, a collapse between communication and situation. Consider, for example, the class of constitutive behaviors that are sometimes called indexical signs, those parts of an utterance that point to some aspect of the spatio-temporal context in which the utterance occurs (Peirce 1932: 143). For example, the "deictics," words such as "this" and "later," are referential indexes in that their specific meanings derive from the contexts in which they occur. For this reason, referential indexes cannot be said to convey abstract associated meanings; their meanings depend upon the contexts in which they are spoken.

To say that some communicative behaviors depend upon the context in which they are spoken is also to say that these behaviors establish contexts, they create situations. For example, many languages have formal and informal second-person pronouns, as English did until a few centuries ago. If I am speaking, say, German, I have a choice; I may refer to you as *Sie* or *Du*. My choice will depend upon our relationship as it

manifests itself in a particular context. The formal/informal pronoun choice is thus indexical, in that it points to an aspect of context, the social relationship between speaker and listener. But this fact may also be viewed from the other direction: my choice of formal or informal pronoun not only depends upon, but also constitutes the social relationship between my interlocutor and me. If at some point I shift to the informal, or if I choose over three decades never to do so, I am nevertheless continually constituting our relationship.⁸

Some constitutive behavior occurs within the realm of the referential. That is, there are constitutive behaviors with consensual interpretations. For example, as Austin (1962) pointed out, there is a class of statements – performatives – which are carried out in being said. If I say “I promise” I have promised; situation merges with communication. Other constitutive behavior occurs outside of the realm of the referential, in the uncleared part of Quine’s jungle of use. These behaviors may or may not be recognized as communicative, but in any case they have no consensual interpretations; these behaviors, at least initially, make no sense. The argument of this book turns on the relationship between these two classes of constitutive behavior; the model for the first is canonical language, the model for the second is metaphor.

Canonical language

Roy Rappaport (1977: 179) suggests that rituals always consist of two sorts of messages. The first sort of message is what he calls “indexical,” information concerning the present state of the participants. The second sort of message is “canonical,” information linked to “enduring aspects of nature, society, or cosmos, and . . . encoded in apparently invariant aspects of liturgical orders” (ibid.: 182). Broadly speaking, ritual works by effecting exchanges between these two levels, so that the canonical and the immediate are brought into contact (cf. also Geertz 1964).

As was noted above, the conversion narrative is a practice through which believers seek to establish some connection between the language of Evangelical Christianity and their own immediate situations. In other words, the believer who would have a conversion must learn to understand experience and the Word of God in the same terms; some point of tangency must be established where the canonical language and experience merge. In this sense, the admonition to seek a conversion is a call to engage in ritual action of the sort that characterizes religions throughout the world. For, as noted, ritual is always a set of activities intended to effect an exchange between the divine and the mundane levels of existence. Ritual is always a point where God and humanity come into contact;

along this dimension the only difference between the conversion and other forms of ritual is that the conversion is focused upon an individual rather than being an overtly communal action.

One would expect that, as a ritual, the conversion narrative would work much as other rituals do, and indeed this is what I will argue. Central to this argument is the contention that the canonical and the immediate, which are somehow brought into contact in the ritual, are both likely to manifest themselves as constitutive phenomena. Recent approaches to ritual analysis have suggested that to the extent that ritual accomplishes its goals, this success may be most usefully traced to the performative aspects of the ritual (Rappaport 1977, Tambiah 1988). In the words of Edward Schieffelin (1985: 709):

ritual language and ritual modes of communication are not effective mainly because they convey information, reveal important cultural truths, or transform anything on the semantic level. Rather, they are compelling because they establish an order of actions and relationships between the participants through restricting and prescribing the forms of speaking (and I would add, interaction) in which they can engage so that they have no alternative way to act. The situation itself is coercive.

Ritual accomplishes its goals to the extent that it is able to make the canonical constitutive. Ritual works, at least in part, as does a performative utterance: a social state is established in the carrying out of the communication. In this way the canonical, the most certain and unquestionable of meanings, is brought into an immediate and ongoing situation. As Rappaport (1977: 192) comments, it is this that makes ritual perhaps the most fundamental social mechanism for establishing the taken-for-granted, the center of the referential:

It is plausible to suggest . . . that ritual, in the very structure of which authority and acquiescence are implicit, was the primordial means by which men, divested of genetically determined order, established the conventions by which they order themselves.

This “conventionalizing” aspect of ritual, however, is only half of the story. For – and this fact has perhaps been somewhat neglected in the social scientific study of ritual – in addition to bringing the canonical into the moment, ritual also brings the moment into the canonical (Geertz 1964). This brings me to a discussion of the other class of constitutive behavior mentioned above, represented by metaphor.

Metaphor

In some ways, the class of constitutive behavior I take metaphor to represent is directly opposed to canonical language. Whereas the canonical is that with the most established meaning, metaphor is language with no established meaning. I must be clear at the outset about two features of the way I use the term “metaphor” that will set my account off from most other treatments. First, I follow Davidson (1984) and Rorty (1987, 1991) in using the term to refer to a rhetorical figure that has no conventional meaning. I do *not* use the term “metaphor” (as do, say, Lakoff and Johnson [1980]) to refer to long-familiar figures such as “things are looking up.”

A metaphor, in the way I will define the term, is a new use of language. It appears, to return once again to Quine’s image of the jungle of use, on the borders of the cleared area. As the metaphor is interpreted, the boundaries of the cleared area change. Something becomes articulable that previously was hidden. In a metaphor words are used in an unfamiliar way, but in a way that can be construed as sensible. If the metaphor is successful, those who encounter it get a sense of an original and compelling meaning. Something new has been brought within the confines of the referential, of the sayable and thus conceivable.

Second, I will often use the term “metaphor” to refer not specifically to a rhetorical figure but rather to a class of communicative behaviors that I take metaphor to represent. That is, I take metaphor to be the paradigm for a whole range of communicative phenomena that may be characterized as “initially opaque to interpretive effort.” Such phenomena may occur in areas such as speech dysfluencies, psychological symptoms, religious and artistic symbolism, and so on.

These phenomena are constitutive because they are communications consisting purely in the realm of situation; they are simply things people do. The situation created is the communication; as in all constitutive phenomena one cannot talk about a “meaning” separate from the situation that is created. Of course, any of these phenomena may be interpreted, they may be drawn within the realm of the referential, and it then becomes possible to talk (or perhaps argue) about the “meaning” of these phenomena.

In the ritual of the conversion narrative, these opaque behaviors are reformulated in terms of the canonical language. It is this I referred to above as “bringing the moment into the canonical.” Thus it should be noted that the two sorts of communicative behaviors I intend to focus on can both be said to occur on the borders of what I have called the constitutive and the referential. In the conversion narrative, the canonical

– that with the most established of referential meanings – becomes constitutive, while the metaphoric – that with no meaning – comes to be interpretable.

Put differently, in ritual one observes the workings of – as Rappaport and others have noted – two sorts of communication, which I will call the canonical and the metaphoric. The canonical is the referential becoming constitutive and the metaphoric is the constitutive becoming referential. Through the interplay of these two sorts of communicative phenomena, *shifts between the referential and the constitutive* may occur. This book offers examples of such shifts in the ritual of the conversion narrative and attempts to demonstrate that it is through these shifts that self-transformation and increased commitment may occur. More specifically, as the canonical becomes constitutive, aspects of religious symbolism come to be real for believers. And as the metaphoric becomes referential, heretofore mysterious behaviors come to be replaced by religious convictions. The details of how these processes transpire will be examined through a detailed look at the performance of the conversion narrative.

The conversion narrative as performance

Normally the conversion is viewed (both by believers and by students of the conversion) as an historical, observable event that is referred to in the conversion narrative. (See, for example, James 1902.) It is furthermore assumed that the transformational efficacy of the conversion experience occurs in the original event. From the believer's perspective, that event was a miracle, a moment in which God intervened in a demonstrable way in the believer's life. The subsequent change in the believer's life evidences the miraculous nature of the event. In this sense, the conversion conforms to the pattern of the appearance of Jesus Christ in history: it is a moment when history embodies the divine. The very logic of the conversion experience, from the perspective of the believer, necessitates the claim that it is an historical event, the conversion, that transforms the believer.

The social scientist must take a different approach, in part because he or she must bracket the miraculous nature of the event. But even more fundamentally, the social scientist has no direct access to the original conversion event. As I suggested above, even if one assumes no conscious intent by the narrator to deceive, the relationship between the conversion story and the original conversion event is problematic.⁹ A conversion experience is a combination of historical events and the person's immediate and subsequent reactions to those events. The analyst cannot assume that the events narrated in the conversion story simply happened in the way the narrator claims, in part because much of the story may reflect