

REVIEW ARTICLE

A.S.A. 10. Social Anthropology and Language
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It is now widely believed that, for good or ill, an important era in British social anthropology has ended. Yet the burial rites seem unduly protracted and the final disposal of the dead presents a peculiar problem for many of them are still in our midst, apparently alive and occasionally kicking. Merely ignoring them seems to have no noticeable effect, while, warmly wrapped in the sheltering syllabus of many departments and rejoicing in the fruits of office, the living dead stalk amongst us, occasionally snatching a juicy new student and turning him into a hard-working but senseless zombie to keep up their numbers.

Or so it might seem if we were to accept many current written and spoken statements at their face value, for many of the 'new anthropologists' appear to be greatly disturbed by the problem of dealing with their old-style predecessors, and some at least are likely to lash about in a fearsome way. Some of this unease may be due to the many strong personal ties of affection and respect that bind the new to their elders. It is, beyond dispute, to these predecessors that we all owe our original teaching and inspiration; it was they who helped finance our research and elected us to whatever posts we now occupy: without them we and our subject are nothing. But there is a further source of unease which lies even deeper than this, for recent studies and insights have increasingly indicated that anthropology may be tending to become its own subject matter. The more we understand about the rules which govern or direct thinking and understanding, the more we are faced with the problem of our own freedom in understanding those rules. If we are to end up as students of Maxwell's demonology it is no wonder that there arises a certain nostalgia for old style simplicity, combined with a contempt for those still blissfully practising it.

The present volume on anthropology and linguistics reflects and develops some of the diverse tendencies within the subject at the moment, for it is both a reconsideration of anthropology's own selfconsciousness and a clearing away of old faults and specialisations. As a result the book is more a matter of careful feeling about, planning and reorientating than a set of new insights thrown off in a creative outburst. While it had been obvious for some time that there was a prime need to reconsider the relationships between anthropology and linguistics, there have been few anthropologists in this country competent to help do this. (Even Lévi-Strauss has been shown to have little clear idea of basic linguistic technicalities, while one of his senior English contemporaries admitted at an Oxford seminar that he had no real idea of what a phoneme was, although he did think it was a good idea.) Fortunately some of these few anthropologists have contributed to this volume, and have clarified some of the problems for the rest of us.

Parts of the book make sad and salutary reading. Hilary Henson explores early anthropological attitudes towards language study and has little difficulty in pointing out their deep in-

adequacies. In doing so she also makes a useful contribution to the rewriting of our own intellectual history. Those old genealogies, running back to Comte or Adam Smith, against which we used to measure our allegiances and generations, may have been suitable for the tribal factions of the 1940's and 1950's but they are no longer flexible or many-branched enough to suit the different patterns and alliances now emerging. Ardener's 'blank banners' of as yet inarticulate protest have, after all, often been filled in the past by writing in old names and old slogans rather than genuinely new creations.

The failure to see language as a subject for theoretical exploration (rather than as a largely unconsidered tool for research) is also documented by Robins' discussion of the relations between Malinowski and Firth. As another piece of historical comment this is interesting and informative, but the essential point that there is more to be said on the 'context of situation' can only be followed up in research. Hymes' paper on the "Ethnography of Speaking" is the most solid and comprehensive contribution from what may still be regarded as the 'other' side. In arguing that our concern is to explore rule-governed behaviour or creativity, Hymes suggests that we have to enlarge our area of observation to include contextual constraints which govern speech, and to try to formulate his 'rules of appropriateness beyond grammar'. Similarly, Pride's discussion of the uses of Barth's transactionalist approach in relation to speech encounters, and Crystal's tentative exploration of the factors involved in code-switching within a 'single' language, all serve to widen and increase our precision in looking at 'context', and make it a possibly fruitful area of co-operation between anthropologists and linguists. Such approaches are clearly capable of leading to some interesting research, and one can visualise whole volumes of projects and results appearing as soon as one reads these papers: and yet they seem likely to produce data/theory conjunctions at a low level of abstraction, that is at the level of social analysis which many anthropologists have recently been concerned to reach beyond.

Elizabeth Tonkin, in her paper on West African Coastal pidgins, attempts to show how someone with a social anthropological training may throw light on the growth of pidgins. Although handicapped by a grave paucity of data, she manages to throw considerable light on the contact situation and its linguistic outcome.

The long and barbarous neglect of theoretical studies in language, documented by Henson and noted in Robins' paper, is also dealt with at length in Ardener's detailed Introduction. In this he also takes the opportunity discreetly to instruct his colleagues in some of the basic points of linguistics. The value of this introduction lies in the careful way in which Ardener covers past relations between social anthropology and linguistics and considers how these may be more usefully developed in future. His section on de Saussure should prove useful, in so far as it helps fill in some of the gaps remaining in our appreciation (or even our knowledge) of what has been happening in Europe during the last fifty years or so. Ardener's remarks on the problems of unpacking ritual systems and symbols into spoken or written 'natural' languages draw attention to how limiting and cumbersome

such a procedure may be. This concern with ritual also raises, albeit by implication, the crucial problem of unravelling the inter-relationships between different codes and how these may be seen as fitting or failing to fit together. In ritual the simultaneous and/or sequential use of words, gestures, objects, music, taste, smell, pain etc. clearly need handling more satisfactorily than has been done heretofore. The ritual that is time itself, or serves to denote time must, of course, also be taken into account here - and it is regrettable that the basic clue in Needham's paper on 'Percussion and Transition' has not been taken up and developed.

Of the anthropologists (if we can still use this label in some contexts) Caroline Humphrey uses terminology and concepts borrowed from linguistics to consider one group of objects which are, at least to some degree, seen by their makers and users as conveying meanings and messages. Clearly, borrowed terminologies are useful and so are some of the problems they suggest (motivated signs, isologics etc.). Yet the final use of such terminologies and concepts must be judged on the grounds of how far they lead to insights which would not have been possible in more conventional ways. In Humphrey's case it looks as though much of her analysis could have been carried out, though more clumsily, with only the most general ideas picked up from linguistics. Her analysis however, is relevant to more general problems of word-object relationships. Its real achievement is regrettably not demonstrated here - that is: her attempt to relate the semiotic in myth to the semiotic of the object. If, as she implies, conflicts or contradictions on one level can be resolved on the other, we may be moving towards some outlining of simple patterns of transformation.

The two key papers are Milner's and Ardener's. One of Ardener's major contributions to the present flux in anthropology has been to help us to understand more clearly the models we use, or have unwittingly used in the past. He continues this in both the Introduction and his chapter on the "Historicity of Historical Linguistics". The latter is a further examination of the problem of time in any model, and an argument that Neogrammarian approaches in this respect have often been misunderstood by outsiders as well as misconceived by insiders. No Africanist will overlook the importance of his clarification of the status of starred forms in relation to the Bantu problem; while the whole paper offers a warning against borrowing or stealing techniques which are not fully understood even by their owners.

Milner's paper has to be seen as part of a set of ideas which he has explored in a number of recent publications. He is interested in a number of more or less fixed forms of verbalisation, and in trying to understand the impact these have on users and hearers. In the present paper he attempts to show that proverbs can be considered as a universal class of verbal forms which operate with a homology between the semantic and syntactic structures, and gain their power from this. In arguing in this way, Milner is also concerned with problems connected with riddles, jokes, and puns and the overall problem of human perceptions of fit or contact between systems, patterns or structures at different levels, or in different areas of experience. As such the paper must be read in conjunction with recent work by Leach, Douglas and others. His method of giving (+) or (-) values to the con-

tent of proverbs is more debatable and one which reflects, as it were, his own intuition about intuition (it should be read in conjunction with his earlier essay on intuition in 'Birds, Twins and the Double Helix').

It is clear that this question of intuition is becoming an area of some importance in our studies. British and French anthropologists have spent a great deal of energy in charting in crude form some of the rules by which people build up or organise their universes, and the linguistic aspect of this is touched on in various places in A.S.A. 10. Some anthropologists have also begun to show how, in particular circumstances, certain basic categories or divisions must be protected against blurring or confusion. But the pictures they have so far produced seem largely one dimensional and static: at bottom there is always the premiss of a static or self-regulating universe in which movement or alteration is unlikely or impossible. What now seems to be happening is that increasing attention is being paid to how actors themselves are able (intuitively) to recognise and jump from one area or one level of the structure or pattern to another, and how they may be simultaneously aware of different patterns or systems within their own culture and manipulate these for their own ends. While Hymes, Crystal, Pride and others are beginning to attack this from the contextual end; Milner and others are attempting to clarify it by investigating the semantic and syntactic structures of common types of verbal formulations.

The whole question of the relationships between codes, structures and patterns within a single culture, or between cultures, is one which it is vital for us to investigate: the days of folding a paper down the middle, writing 'left' and 'right' on either side of the crease and then filling in the rest ... female, male, bad, good, wet, dry, etc., are now over. The grounds for the understanding of the ways people are able to recognise patterns and structures which are not fully manifest is becoming easier to investigate, now that we have realised that a simple set of such complementary oppositions may often be too basic, or too one-dimensional, to apply in circumstances where actors themselves may be manipulating and rearranging the systems. In this respect a large number of recent essays on actor-initiated transformations begin to come together: Tambiah on magic, Douglas on jokes, Hammet on riddles, and so on. Milner's work on proverbs has begun to demonstrate how these serve to stress clear relationships by posing them in terms of the activities or characteristics of well-known creatures, objects or specific human roles. The relations thus posed are extremely simple, and therefore widely applicable. The head/tail structure allows situations to be formulated or reformulated by posing homologies between existing situations and one part of the proverb, with the implication that the rest of the proverbial relationship will follow and thus serve to formulate or clarify that part of the situation which has yet to occur. In some societies proverb may be tacked to proverb until an elaborate abstract structure has been created, and a situation fully explored on the non-real level and then, when agreement has been reached, the real situation re-ordered.

If proverbs as one type of verbal formulation can be seen as providing batteries of "portable paradigms" in this way, perhaps it may be possible to see riddles as one way people play with un-

important parallel or homologous relationships in the cosmos which each society builds for itself; they are temporary tinkering with categories which leave the greater structure untouched. Jokes, similarly, come within the same broad framework for they also point out links which are normally just beneath the general level of normal perception and operation. As Koestler long ago pointed out in The Sleepwalkers, jokes are like 'scientific' discovery, for they posit and imply new orderings of relations; but the joke remains a joke rather than a discovery, because these new patterns will not hold right across the board -- no more than a single spark jumping a gap between two charged bodies is the same thing as a continuous current that will weld them together into a new structure.

While discussing the hesitant beginnings of such studies of transformations between patterns, or from level to level, it is also worth stressing the appalling past neglect of technological processes by British social anthropologists. If we are embarking on such a study of patterns and codes it would seem sensible to start at the low level where actual physical transformations take place (the purpose of technological operations) or which native actors recognise as being rule governed transformations. Technological processes centre around physical transformations which are largely unidirectional. Leach and Lévi-Strauss have already shown that the results of these transformations, the items involved or the process used may be built into the system at a different level yet the simple problems of how these physical transformations are explained, categorised, and divided in native systems still await detailed and adequate explanation.

Equally we might pay more attention to material substances which serve to carry out various transformations and translations. One very basic aspect of money stuffs, for example, is that they exist to make things, which are recognised as being disparate, equivalent (and therefore exchangeable) in terms of a common substance. By virtue of the addition of other symbolic systems: number, weight, size, and so on, money gains the increasing power of subsuming or abstracting from other categories. Freud recognised the prevalence of money/excrement equivalences, and Douglas has suggested that excrement not only cuts across boundaries in the human body but, like money, it has the characteristic of reducing the disparate to a common matter. The widespread equivalence of water/money as solvents of things or categories also suggests further areas of investigation.

There is thus some slight interest developing in the various problems associated with the actors' comprehension of 'fit' between various patterns, and how these are manipulated and overcome. This in turn relates to basic questions about the usefulness of all models and why some should be more attractive than others. Certain areas of the relationship between linguistics and anthropology may prove fruitful in developing investigations in this area and the papers of Humphreys, Ardener and Milner are likely to be most useful.

But beyond this lies the far more basic question which continues to trouble anthropology and of which A.S.A. 10 is merely a symptom: the question of whether there still is or

should be a discipline identifiable as social anthropology. A great deal of the energy and worry devoted to this question is misplaced. The question of whether we have a discipline of our own, however defined and constituted, is one which may be relevant to the politics of grant-grabbing and administrative convenience, but has nothing to do with intellectual achievement. We are interested, or we should be, in everything which pertains to the life of man in society: anything, any method, any theory which throws light on this should therefore be of interest to us. Even the usual claim that it is useful to cut off a small area of the total field in order to plough it properly no longer seems defensible: the isolation charted by Hension merely makes our past efforts laughable.

Yet we seem also to be running a further, connected risk at the moment: that of taking two steps backward in order to take one step forward safely and surely. Conferences and debates on past errors and current trends may be useful in some circumstances, but in the final count a research subject can only exist by intelligent people getting on with original research. If our understanding of society is to increase we should cease to sit around bemoaning the fact that anthropology no longer looks like it did a generation ago; nor should we spend our time simply untangling old muddles. Our error in the past was to mistake the predilections and intellectual tendencies of a few established academics for a discipline, and to think that ideas could be tied down to some sort of isolated sphere. Techniques may develop among particular academic groups, but what they are used for is not to be confined in any way. In the past much of British Social Anthropology has been distinguished by a combination of poor scholarship and intellectual narrowness. We now need a new intellectual community. What the members of that community call themselves does not matter: we are after understanding, not labels.

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