

'Behaviour': A social anthropological criticism

We have been offered the term behaviour as a cross-disciplinary concept with applications throughout the component subjects of the Human Sciences degree.<sup>1</sup> It is a strange term to use for it is a genuine product of social life - with a characteristic sociolinguistic history. Like its verb 'behave', it seems to be a fifteenth century coinage. The verb was originally always reflexive and consciously derived from 'have', (so that a person 'behad' himself), and the force of the be- preverb was to denote the imposition of a constraint on the person involved. The substantive was formed upon havour, or haviour, 'possession', which came straight from French avoir at the same period. Although haviour and behaviour were thus of independent origin, the new substantive was, by its French ornamentation, quite appropriate to express a certain conception of deportment, or socially prescribed or sanctioned conduct. It became a semantic doublet of demeanour, but differently marked. Demeanour had a more lower class application: behaviour thus emerges in a period when an expectation of restraint in upper class behaviour could be regarded as desirable. The positive marking of concepts that referred to courtly life in the late middle-ages is well documented by Trier and his successors. Behaviour without modifier, was marked as 'good'; the 'behaviour' being watched for was 'good deportment'. Bad behaviour was failed behaviour. Demeanour without modifier was marked as 'bad': the 'demeanour' being watched for was 'bad deportment'. Good demeanour was corrected demeanour. Afterwards the semantic field of behaviour invaded not only that of demanour but of conduct, comportment and the rest.

It is important then to stress that behaviour is a term from a set of terms, and a set of terms from a particular historical period. It is strange to social anthropologists, steeped as we are in language, to be shown the term as something quasi-objective: as an 'idea' or 'concept' to be exemplified even 'defined' in various supposed manifestations in disparate kinds of data. Behaviour when we meet it first is, we note, a coining and a slightly grandiose one. It thus labels a new kind of component. In that world, there could be no such thing as 'random' behaviour.

The extension of 'behave' and 'behaviour' into scientific discourse is Victorian. The first applications are in Chemistry in the 1850's and '60's ('It combines violently with water, behaving like the bichloride of tin', 1854; 'In Chemistry, the behaviour of different substances towards each other, in respect of combination and affinity', 1866 - O.E.D.). These early examples have still some of the direct living metaphor about them. The very model of orderly discrimination of the conditions under which things acted as they did, was derived from social behaviour. Behaviour was marked therefore for its knowability in advance: an image or aspiration for the natural order. When in 1878 T. H. Huxley is talking of the 'behaviour of water', he is reducing to orderly terms the activities of a supremely unpredictable element. No doubt it was the continual use of 'behaviour' in contexts in which the activity was far from understood, that led to its association with 'activity in general', and even ('behaviour problems') towards relatively violent activity. The generalization of 'behaviour' to the inanimate world has since then gone so far that we tend to think of it as 'action that is not yet understood' rather than as 'action that is supremely understood' because prescribed.

It is ironical that the use of the term 'animal behaviour' probably owes more to its natural science uses than it does to its original social use. Paradoxically, then, we are offered 'behaviour' as a quantifiable universal, a mere century after its metaphorical use in natural science began. Of course, there has been retained throughout the essential component of

'constraint on action'. At all times 'behaviour' has been conceived of as rule-governed: the natural science shift has moved the locus of the rules. At one time behaviour is expressly the subject of rules, at another it is the subject of an aspiration that it will turn out to be governed by rules.

Not all the 'behaviours' we have heard about today are the same. To ask a social anthropologist to treat 'behaviour' as a universal and to relate it to his own subject, is inevitably to miss the point of all recent advances in the subject. To acquiesce in the game for a while, we note that the post-Victorian uses of 'behaviour' do not easily translate into the languages of other peoples. Even in other European languages there are well-known difficulties. Many of the terms in use in them are too embarrassingly close to terms for (social) good conduct. The translation of the American Behavioral is a perpetual crux in international literature. The situation is then not resolved by appeal to an independent scientific vocabulary. 'Behaviour' turns out to be wrenched from a set of terms in the English lexicon, trailing still the evidence of its old connexions.

In more exotic but still reflective societies, 'behaviour' has to be subsumed under various terms indicating acts of a socially appropriate or inappropriate kind. Sometimes there is no lexical link between the terms for 'bad behaviour' and 'good behaviour'. In Igbo, the verb radical m<sup>e</sup> ('do, make') appears in words like omum<sup>e</sup>, ome, or the like, each of which expresses activity that is marked according to social evaluations; ome in the phrase ome nala ('ome in the country') is what whites usually misleadingly translate as 'custom'. The important point to grasp is, however, that actions in Igbo society are identified a priori. There is no objective field of behaviour.

We are different, of course, you will argue. That is why we are 'human scientists'. It does not always look very like it, when we tote terms about in this way. Once we enter the human zone, we are dealing with classes of action. Unfortunately, we are not the main classifiers. That position is occupied by the human beings who are acting. It is always the major task in social anthropology to find the actors' classification. This is not quite the same as asking him why he is acting. Our first task is to agree on what actions are significant for him. E.g. when a yam-hole is dug, among a certain people, herbs are added and a quantity of ash. The whole activity may be described by the farmer as done 'to make the yam grow'. It is not uncommon in such situations for the observer to say that some of this action is 'symbolic' - because for instance, the herbs have little or no chemical fertilizing effect. The matter of the ash may however detain him, because it may seem 'really' to have a fertilizer effect (potash etc.). He is thus tempted to subdivide the action sequence into symbolic and instrumental sections. He may still do this when (say) he learns from an agriculturalist that, the ash does not have chemically significant effect, for even false attempts at 'science' may be classified differently from hopeless non-science. That kind of classification is seen in many ordinary monographs. Even Evans-Pritchard came dangerously near to such distinctions at times. They lie in the system of discriminations of the recorder. In the particular case we are not justified in breaking up the planting sequence in this way. To do so distorts the significance of the different parts of the sequence, according to criteria which are irrelevant to the actor.

Presented with 'behaviour' then, we find that we can only speak of kinds of significant action. The markers for that significance are however, not directly given in the action itself (or if we think they are they require a much more sophisticated theory to detect them). Where human beings are concerned the action is the final output of a very complicated programme. We are not, however, simply in the zone marked 'systems of thought'. Some of our work may have been misleading in this respect. Societies differ

greatly in the degree to which they externalize (into action), or internalize (into language) the processes by which they (i.e. the societies) operate. Thus, it is often forgotten that E-P said that the Azande demonstrate their system by enacting it. The Ibo at times seem to belong to a society which 'knows' what it is doing only by doing it. We find richly differentiated rituals and the constant generation of 'new customs'; 'fashions' of all kinds sweep over the social surface in rapid succession. There is little mythological or ideological superstructure, in contrast with, for example, the Bakweri. This people, in contrast, has no rich variety of action: minor events, are, however, charged with enormous significance, which derives from the internalization of an unseen universe of causes, for which a command of the language and its expression of the non-behavioural world-structure is absolutely essential. For the Igbo, events are like a rapid continuous game of draughts, with a plethora of moves, and brilliant sequences leading to few basic changes in the balance of pieces. For the Bakweri events come after long intervals, charged with relational value, like those of chessmen in a master tournament.

The arguments for the view of society as a manifold both of ideas (stored in various linguistic and other 'semiotic' forms) and action, are made more cogent nowadays by the increasing evidence that societies (as in the cases I have mentioned) differ in the degree to which the action component itself embodies cues to its own significance. Historical periods marked by labile social forms may exemplify, in an exaggerated manner, some of the features I have ascribed to the Ibo, and may repay close attention to the 'action', which may embody many of the cues to its own interpretation. It is however, characteristic, that they in their turn, frequently become enshrined in the ideas store of a subsequent period. I have in mind unreflective action periods like that of the American West, which store their significance later as mythology. This mythology in its turn generates successive transformations of itself, and in turn generates actions of an existentially different type, in later periods - as it might be street-gang 'behaviour', or even aspects of the Vietnam War.

As a system over time, the social does not yield its essential features through a study of 'behaviour', even though for some stretches 'behaviour' may be more significant than others.

Social anthropologists have long been forced to realize that there is no universal unit of 'action' in society. The general theory is acquiring a certain solidity now. The kinds of empiricism required for its operation are appearing in a variety of disciplinary guises. Socio-linguistic approaches exist (some actions can only be triggered, or even recognized, in specified linguistic contexts). 'Situational analyses' of various kinds, are responses to some of these needs. Elsewhere we hear of 'symbolic interaction', even of 'symbolic interactionism'. We sometimes hear regrettably of 'symbolic behaviour'. The separation of the empirical aspects from the theoretical is somewhat more characteristic of the sociological developments, than of social anthropology. Nevertheless we all have to guard against over-determining a distinction in our own culture, objectifying it through new data, and then receiving it back, no longer able to recognise our own artefact. 'Behaviour' is such a case: we may clutch it as those experimental monkey infants clutch their mothers made of wire, and receive precious little nourishment.

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#### Note

1. This paper is the text of a comment on the term 'Behaviour' presented to a discussion between tutors in the Human Sciences Honour School at Nuffield College, 6 October, 1973.