

Discourse and the No-thing-ness of Culture

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ABSTRACT

Where can we find “culture” in relation to humans’ experience of it in by-degrees normatively appropriate and socially effective semiotic interactions? By analyzing several examples of such semiotic material, we can develop the idea that “culture” is a socio-historically contingent wave phenomenon immanent in social practice dimensionalized by semiotic characteristics I here term signification—circulation—emanation.

At my urging, a poster announcing this as a talk included a little conceptual-art joke by using a background photograph of a “kitchen sink.” The intent was interdiscursively to index—to point to—the famous 1871 characterization by Sir Edward B. Tylor in his book *Primitive Culture*, with which Alfred L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn begin their “critical review of concepts and definitions” of “culture” in 1952. Tylor’s introductory sentence is the very first among those quoted in their section on “enumeratively descriptive” definitions, as they cosmetically term the type: “Culture, or civilization, . . . is that complex whole which includes knowledge,

A very early draft of these ideas—“The Elementary Forms of Culture in a Post-‘culture’-al World: Signification—Circulation—Emanation”—was presented at the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Central European University, Budapest, March 26, 2007. Slightly revised versions were presented at the conference on “Mediatization and Identity,” Department of Anthropology, Stanford University, November 19, 2008; at the Linguistic Anthropology Working Group, University of California, Berkeley, February 27, 2009; as invited plenary address, American Association of Applied Linguistics annual meeting, Chicago, March 29, 2011; at the conference “Linguagenesis,” Center for the Humanities, Brown University, Providence, RI, May 19, 2011; at the Theory and Media Colloquium, Yale University, Departments of English and Comparative Literature, September 15, 2011; and at the Linguistic Anthropology Workshop, Department of Anthropology, University of Michigan, February 17, 2012. The prefinal draft, under the title used here, was a lecture in the colloquium series of the Department of Anthropology, Harvard University, September 27, 2012. I have incurred debts both to my numerous interlocutors on those occasions who questioned and therefore contributed to clarifying my formulations and to those most responsible for invitations to present these ideas: Daniel Monterescu, Miyako Inoue, Charles Briggs, Suresh Canagarajah, Paja Faudree, Michael Warner, Bruce Mannheim, Judith Irvine, and Nicholas Harkness. Enthusiastic positive readings by Greg Urban and by a reviewer of the paper for *Signs and Society* have, as well, emboldened me finally to publish it with revisions attempting to respond to their comments.

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Since this article was published online on October 25, 2013, a correction has been made to figure 17. These changes were made in both the online and print versions of the article. Corrected on November 25, 2013.

belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (1871, 1.1). Talk about kitchen sinks! Even the subtitle of Tylor’s book is enumerative: *Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art and Custom*.

Indeed, in those heady days of social evolutionary explanation illuminated by Darwinian light, it was the collectanea of travelers’ and missionaries’ reports, of philologically worked-over texts, and especially of artifacts—things—displayable in museum cases that constituted the evidence to be examined, classified along relevant dimensions from simple to complex, allowing typology to be converted to diachrony. Our “living ancestors” by then at the fringes of imperial enterprises, no less than our civilizational ancestors as revealed by comparative philology, could be seen to evidence “culture” in the general sense, just as the particulars carefully segregated and labeled by provenance and provenience were the empirical evidence for the existence of particular cultures in the plural (see Stocking 1987; Silverstein 2005b).

We need not review Kroeber and Kluckhohn’s several hundred definitions and characterizations of “culture” down to 1952, nor even those of the sixty years since. What is important to note is that all of their writers and those since have been trying to answer the question of what “culture” is. I would suggest that the proper question is “Where is culture?” And, in the nature of matters cultural—note my substitution of the adjective—the “where” question can only be answered by exploring the semiotics of discourse, which, in the widest sense, including language-in-use as well as other modes of semiosis, is the way culture presents itself to humanity. Events of discourse, including both the verbal and the otherwise (e.g., Maussian [(1924–25) 1967] cycles of interagent prestation—counter-prestation— . . .), manifest whatever is specific to the sociocultural order of phenomena, whatever of other orders may also be involved, such as human organismal psycho-biology. So I propose here to consider some examples of these phenomena as a semiotician of discourse to see what they reveal.

Using such examples, my aim is briefly to outline the intersecting dimensions of a semiotic space in which “culture” is to be found, such dimensions being (a) a regime of evenemential *signification* immanent in the very experience of situated social practice, (b) a regime of implied paths or networks of *circulation* of signifying value across such event-nodes in an intuited socio-spatio-temporal structure, and (c) a regime of multiple centers and peripheries—polar-coordinated geometries—of circulatory *emanation* of signifying value always, inevitably, in flux. Within this complexly dimensionalized semiotic, sites of interaction can be recognized as nodes of signifying practice indexically revealing knowledge and

values (and therefore identities) that people instantiate and contest in the semiotic production of genred cultural events. Patterns of interdiscursivity across such semiotic nodes sometimes generate institutionally regular trajectories of what is recognized as circulation, creating and maintaining thereby networks of virtual interaction. Such circulations strengthen and cumulate in emergently fixed and tiered structures of emanation from certain centers of value production that anchor particular trajectories of circulation, the values from several of which can intersect—sometimes conflictually—at ever new sites of experience and interaction. All this seems highly abstract, so let us proceed to examples, each one manifesting all of these dimensionalities, to be sure, but used here serially to illustrate my points in order.

First, let's consider *signification*. You will note the closeness of the term to the verb signify- and thus, suggestively, to that old bugaboo, meaning.¹ I avoid the latter to emphasize, first, that we are not doing what used to go by the label of “symbolic anthropology.”² My usage of “signification” is, second, designed to suggest significance, as in consequentiality, as in effects and effectiveness of semiotic practice as social action.³ As will become clear, semiosis as significant behavior and the like “does” something in and to its social framing.

Look at a tiny but revelatory snippet of face-to-face signifying practice, shown in figure 1. I've published several analyses (see Silverstein 1985, 1997, 2005a) of the longer two-participant conversation between these two graduate students at the University of Chicago, but here I want to focus very specifically on the mechanism of culture here revealed. Seated in a small room on campus in February 1974 and instructed by experimenters to have a conversation, Mr. A, a

1. Signs cited as forms-with-meanings are *italicized*, and those cited as forms (i.e., sign-vehicles) are underlined.

2. What is generally denoted by this term is a movement or cluster of movements within the discipline of anthropology peaking ca. 1965–75 that, seeking to counter the perceived arid sociologism of British-derived social anthropology, talked endlessly about culture's being “symbols” and “meanings.” See such works as Turner (1967, 1969), Schneider (1968), Geertz (1973), and many of the contributions in Basso and Selby (1976). Often, such work rested on the basis of what can only be termed uninformed ideas about semiosis—frequently confusing this with Saussurean dyadic paradigmatic structures (A : B), with actual lexical senses, with connotational associations, etc.—bespeaking as well philosophical views of language and mind uninformed by coeval pragmatist ferment (Putnam 1978; Rorty 1979) that resisted the ultimately dead-end foundationalism of earlier post-Enlightenment trends (see Losonsky 2006).

3. In anthropological terms, such concerns are similar to those professed by the self-styled “practice theorists”—Ortner (1984) is a kind of manifesto—who rebelled against their teachers, purveyors of—to them—seemingly inert, merely representational “symbols and meanings” signifying nothing. Eschewing, then, the “symbols-and-meanings” concepts of “culture,” wishing to study matters of political and political economic “power,” they resorted, in an almost knee-jerk fashion, to Marx-oid ideas of power as being somehow extra-semiotic. Given their hostility to semiotics—misunderstood as “symbols and meanings”—we can perhaps understand the popularity of the formulation, “the poetics *and* politics of . . .” so common in these scholars' book titles, as though these were really distinct.

<p>Q_{A8} An' you_[B] wént to undergraduate [school] hére ór</p> <p>ÓhÓhÓhÓhÓh! I_[A]'m an óld Jesuit boy myself_[A],</p> <p style="padding-left: 100px;">¶unfortunately¶</p> <p>R_{A1} [] Georgetown, down ¶in Washington¶</p>	<p>R_{B8} [] in Chicago át, uh, Loyola</p> <p>¶Oh áre ya_[A]?¶</p> <p>Q_{B1} Where'd¶ you_[A] gó?</p> <p>¶Ó:h yéah,¶ yeah</p>
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Figure 1. A moment of symmetrically revealed identities

Law School student whose words are transcribed on the left, has already been for some time the persistent questioner of Mr. B, a graduate student in the School of Social Service Administration, transcribed in the right column, in a conversational genre I like to term, after Rogers and Hammerstein, “Getting to Know You” (GTKY). He has been trying, it will emerge, to find out Mr. B’s undergraduate institution. After a lengthy digression about the state of Iowa, where Mr. B said he had “lived,” Mr. A makes precise his request for information: “An’ you_[B] wént to undergraduate [school] hére ór [in/at Iowa]?” Sitting, as they were, on the premises of the University of Chicago Law School, within its campus, ‘here’ might be the very same university or any other outfit in Chicago, or, in fact, in the whole state of Illinois (as opposed to Iowa, which has been the contrastive reference, a distinct state bordering the state of Illinois to the west). Observe Mr. B’s careful, if seemingly hesitant response: “[] in Chicago át, uh, Loyola.” (By the rules of American English grammar, note the ‘in’ vs. ‘at’ distinction—place vs. organizational affiliation—on which Mr. B’s response plays.) Mr. B is using the short form of the institutional name, Loyola University of Chicago, in 1974 principally a commuter and evening college without much of a campus before its rebranding in the past decade or so.

Now why would Mr. A, then a second-year Law School student, be so concerned with this particular bit of biographical information about Mr. B, then a first-year student in the University of Chicago’s School of Social Service Administration (social work)? Especially among the American bourgeoisie, in those days, principally the male professional bourgeoisie—note the demographic identifiers already thick on the ground—an important emblem of identity is the old-school tie, as it were, punning on the item of sartorial display that indexically links one to an institution of undergraduate tertiary education. (Upper classes had, additionally, private prep school at the level of secondary education.) Mr. A’s interest as a persistent questioner is hardly random, then; his questioner’s part of the coparticipation in this event of GTKY does not, in fact, seek random

biographical facts. His interest rests, to be sure, on a cultural affordance that thus valorizes—more precisely, gives context-defining indexical salience to—Mr. B’s response, thickening the intersubjective context by this differentiating revelation that his old-school tie is not, in fact, the U of C, one of the possible ‘here’s up to this point, but Loyola University in the same city.

But what does Mr. A make in the way of significance—in fact, of indexical signification—of this piece of information? “ÓhÓhÓhÓhÓh!” he exclaims in recognition, “I_[A]’m an óld Jesuit boy myself_[A],” adding, with a wide, fixed grin of mock self-deprecation, a characteristic index of male-male in-group interactional style, “unfortunately.” Observe what he has achieved interactionally, how he has not only ratified a conceptual—a denotational—understanding of Mr. B’s descriptor, *Loyola*, but has framed its indexical signification for the identity-work that is developing what we term the *interactional text* here, the genre of consequential event in which he and Mr. B are engaged, getting to know one another in some thickening of mutually relevant as well as mutually revealed biographical detail. Mr. A has just placed himself as well as Mr. B within the umbrella of Jesuit institutions of tertiary education, presumably those in North America, both Mr. A and Mr. B enjoying the status of “old boys,” that is, former students, now graduates, within that framework. (Had the term of address existed at that time, it’s almost certain Mr. A would be saying, “Hey, dude, I’m an old Jesuit boy myself!” with Mr. B responding “Dude!” instead of—as he does in 1974—“Oh áre ya_[A]?”)

But what does a cultural insider know about those Jesuit institutions of tertiary education? (Or even cultural outsiders like *U.S. News and World Report* or *Princeton Review*?) Observe that there is in fact a schema of cultural knowledge that is being indexed, pointed to, and drawn upon, in this little exchange (see fig. 2). Not only are there twenty-eight such institutions in North America, which can be diagrammed as a multibranching taxonomy of equivalent exemplifications of the superordinate category, as shown; these exemplars are as well differentially ranked or seriated (indicated by the “unequal” sign) as to a hierarchy of prestige of credential, perquisites of campus and postcampus life, institutional comparabilities to institutions beyond the Jesuit set, et cetera. Thus, when Mr. B, in a perfect mirror-image sequence opener, asks Mr. A, “Where’d you_[A] gó [to undergraduate school]?” Mr. A responds with his exquisitely chiasmatic expression, elaborating first his Jesuit institution followed by the gratuitous reference to its city, matching Mr. B’s “in Chicago.” He responds, “[] Georgetown, down in Washington,” the gratuitousness of the place-name confirmed by Mr. B’s back-channel response

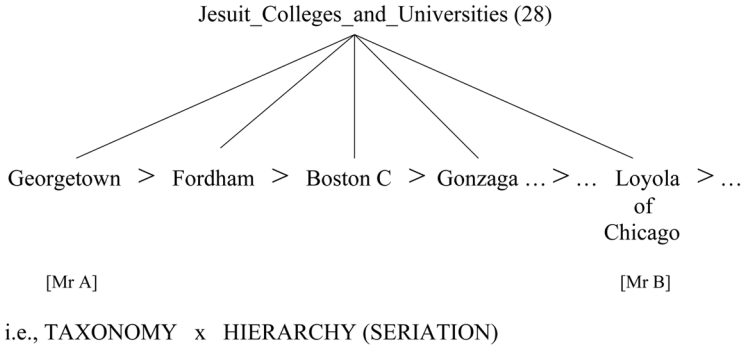


Figure 2. Conceptual space of undergraduate affiliations of Messrs. A & B

that does not even wait for this information but overlaps it. (Imagine a response like “Harvard College, a school in Cambridge, Massachusetts.”)

A piece of interactional work has been done, to be sure, clarifying for each other who—that is, socioculturally speaking, tokens of what social types—our interlocutors are or, more carefully put, have become. Messrs. A and B are “placed” in the real time of interaction by virtue of their emblematic placement with respect to the cultural conceptualizations that have been invoked and attached to each in the course of their conversation. They have managed conversationally to double their intra-Chicago status asymmetry, established at the very outset by their having mutually revealed their relative places within the hierarchically status-conferring partonomy of the University of Chicago (see fig. 3), now diagrammatically renewed by their emblematic old-school ties within the seriation x taxonomy of Jesuit institutions of higher education. Much that fol-

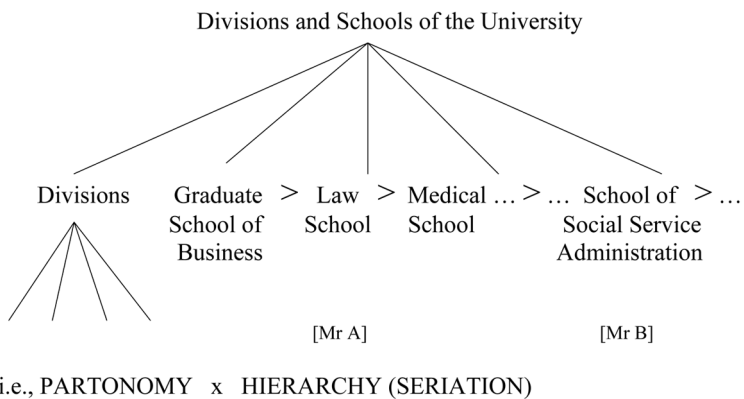


Figure 3. Conceptual space of professional-school affiliations of Messrs. A & B

lows in the rest of their videotaped interaction rests on this earlier structure of interactional coparticipation, to which each has certainly contributed but which neither has completely controlled. Note that insofar as performance of social statuses is concerned, one generally does not flat-footedly denote one's status (though children do this in pretend-play role-taking all the time with explicit metapragmatic stipulations, such as "You are the child and I am the daddy, so I'll tell you what to do!"; see Sawyer 1997). There is no Austinian explicit primary performative, no would-be "behabitive" construction (Austin 1975, 160–61) of the form "I statusize myself relative to you thusly." But intersubjectively understood relative statuses are invoked, ratified, or contested as part of the ongoing co-construction of the role-relationality, the mutual coordination, of participants in a social event.

All interaction is of this nature, whether face-to-face, as here, or mediated by text-artifacts. As we indexically invoke the (presupposed) cultural knowledge that gives interactional effect to what we say, by choice of expression we explicitly introduce such pieces of cultural knowledge into interactional space-time, in effect we "create" context, such that this knowledge can be indexically called upon later in the interaction as a now-given resource for self-other alignment.

Were Mr. A and Mr. B really engaging in a contest of status, an interactional text of "One Upmanship" rather than just "Getting to Know You" at this point Mr. A would definitely be "up" and Mr. B "down." But that is not the point here. It is important to see that there is a particular mechanism of signification at work in the orderliness with which signs—here, words and expressions—are introduced into the intersubjective space between participants getting to know one another by alternating-turn question-and-answer, the development of a social "context" that comes to frame them with ever more specificity. With respect to such context, the words and expressions in their grammatical and contextual configurations do effective social work by drawing upon or presuming upon—indexically presupposing, we say—schemata of socially locatable knowledge of the universe—here, political geography, institutions of education, et cetera—rendering each participant's interactionally relevant relative position a consequence of location within and perspective on such knowledge. The knowledge is, as it were, "made flesh" in the interactional here and now as participants co-construct an interactional text, a coparticipatory "do[ing] things with words."

All contextual and contextualizing "signification" is thus fundamentally indexical in character, as signs invoke particular knowledge schemata identifiable with social positionality, attitudes, et cetera in social formations, and make such social positionality, attitudes, et cetera "real" and consequential for themselves

and for others copresent or referred to in the here and now. We do not engage in social interaction merely to convey information, to make propositions about or representations of a distinct and separate world, notwithstanding our “official” ideology of language and of many other sign systems hides the real work of semiosis behind this screen of representational inertness (a screen sometimes itself interactionally useful; see Silverstein 1976, 47). Once we properly understand what is “cultural” about interactional semiosis—potent context-defining and -transforming indexicality—and once, most importantly, we learn how to lay it bare through analysis, we see that every event even of so-called politics—let alone political economy—is really composed of “poetics” all the way down.

* * *

So far, then, we see how to read the cultural signification of what goes on verbally and otherwise in an event of discursive interaction. Now let’s turn to *circulation*. Here we are concerned with the apparent movement or transfer of signification across events of discursive and equivalent interaction in social process. This happens through the mechanisms of interdiscursivity—communicative events creatively referencing other communicative events (see Bauman 2004; Agha and Wortham 2005), whether prior or subsequent. In humanistic cultural criticism, people have long thought about the circulation of intertexts connecting textual forms. René Magritte’s famous painting of 1929, captioned “Ceci n’est pas une pipe,” became his most important emblematic piece, one that in later years he himself parodied intertextually with many paintings captioned “Ceci n’est pas un(e) . . .”; the intertext has now become in effect a genre and the original a source of the punch line of cartoons such as the one in figure 4, showing characters, one of them Magritte, verbalizing a reciprocally ironic and even cynical “gift” exchange.

But perhaps the most characteristic kind of cultural circulation is for an account of Event One to be woven into Event Two, for an account of Event Two to be woven into Event Three, and so on (“Tom reported that Dick said that Harry was thinking about . . .”). In this socio-spatio-temporal sequence moving across sites of communicative transmission, each prior event becomes the object signaled about as well as a source for signification in the event that frames it, as shown in the contrast of diagrams in figure 5: the temporal process over an interval of time, delta t , is really a process of iteratively nested meta-meta- . . . meta-pragmatic framing all the way back to some event-from-which the series or sequence takes off. We sometimes can trace this process, and sometimes we

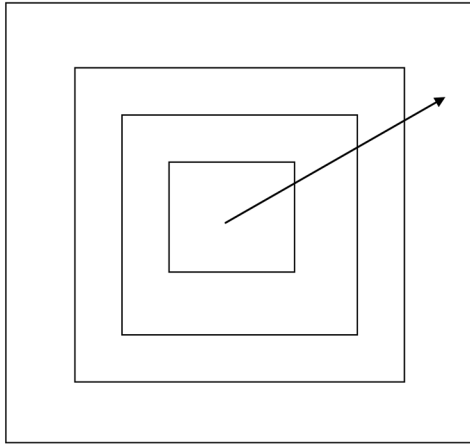


Figure 4. Interdiscursivity of the *longue durée* for a René Magritte “meme.” BIZARRO ©2004 Dan Piraro, Dist. by King Features. Used by permission.

must merely assume that because a communicative event, such as that of Mr. A chatting with Mr. B, presumes upon certain cultural knowledge normatively associable with someone who engages in (or has engaged in) certain kinds of communicative events at certain social loci, there must have been circulation of such knowledge through characteristic chains of interdiscursive transmission.

“Circulation” of (type-level) semiotic material is then an inferred effect or consequence of (token-level) interdiscursive links across interactional sites, whether such links are those of true intertextuality (“replication” by degrees; Urban 1996, 2001) or of representation (report) or of indexical *renvoi* or prolepsis. The proper perceptual analogy is of the emergently patterned structure of “circulation” of light—a trick effect—under a movie-theater marquee, which is merely the effect of the (individual or token) lights’ being illuminated in rapid serial order below the perceptual threshold of acuity. (Note the metaphorical parallel to the perceptual trick of “moving pictures,” too!) For cultural semiosis, circulation is a process predicable at the intensional level of a whole social formation;

Meta-semiosis to semiosis relationship: narrating universes and narrated universes



Trajectory of semiotic events interdiscursively connected

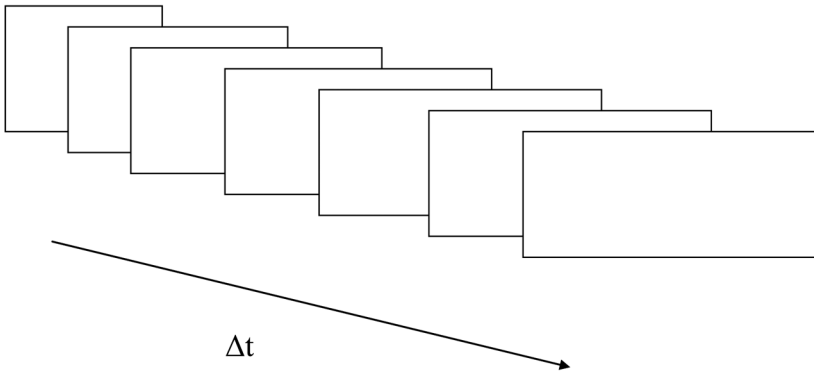


Figure 5. Semiotic logical and temporal relations of interdiscursivity

it differs in this sense from the serially realizable spatio-temporal transmission of objects, even of text-artifactual objects as such, for example as commodities.⁴

The central sociological characteristic of circulation is that it is lumpy and unstable, precisely because the interactional events mediated by what we can term “transmission” of textual (“entextualized”) semiosis are nodes in chains of

4. The formulation here benefits from comments of my longtime interlocutory partner Greg Urban, whose work has particularly emphasized these type-level issues of circulation of “culture,” whether as (inter)texts or emergent structures-of-knowledge or structures-of-value. See, in addition to the works cited, Urban (2010).

connectivity regimented by social structures of many different kinds. We never communicate with others purely as disembodied and a-social cognitions: our relative positionalities as social selves are essentially involved—statuses in systems of categories in sociological parlance—as are our group interests—in the politico-economic and more frankly political sense—and as are our individual and group projects toward the accomplishment of which in particular sites of communicative contact and coordination among individuals is the *sine qua non*. Everyone in a social formation does not communicate directly with everyone else about everything that is on his or her mind, notwithstanding fantasies about happy rational communicators in otherwise unstructured mass “public spheres.”⁵ Even my adult Australian Aboriginal friends in a society of fifteen hundred revealed extraordinarily well-kept lines of demarcation about who could communicate with whom, based on classificatory kinship, initiation status, and, of course, gender. And even if someone normatively unauthorized to have heard—and therefore to know—something actually knew it, that person would never think of ever communicating it in any publicly acknowledgeable way—only, fortunately, to the friendly visiting anthropologist, quietly and under wraps. Universal communicative circulation is not even true in really small-scale social formations like domestic groups such as nuclear families, as Simmel (1906) long ago discussed; why would one not understand how socially complex are the routes of circulation in mass society?

Consider news reportage in our mass media as an institutionalized route by which this process, the circulation of cultural signification, happens. In fact, in modern mass societies, organizations (bureaus, firms) of extraordinary size and tiered complexity attempt to manage such circulation of narrative, in the form of news reports transmitted at clock and calendar intervals, like radio “news-on-the-hour” or “evening news” on a television channel, or what Walter Benjamin (cited in Anderson 1983, 39) called “the 24-hour best-seller,” the newspaper—that we will now revise to the “24-second best-seller” on Twitter. In contemporary mass cultural times, these kinds of organizationally produced and transmitted narratives of doings and happenings play a central role in the coordination of knowledge, values, and opinions that allows various kinds of interest groups to form and even to act in group terms—or for various interests within a social formation to work to prevent this. (One thinks of the Hosni Mubarak

5. I allude here to the large literature that has emerged in response to ideas of Jürgen Habermas (1989) about the rise of and threats to a “bourgeois public sphere” as the legitimate matrix of rational public opinion in a polity. The nature of such “publics” and of their encompassed heterogeneity has been much debated in the years since. Among key and influential discussions see, e.g., Fraser (1990), Warner (1990, 2002), Gal and Woolard (2001), and much ethnographic literature.

government in its last days in Egypt in 2011 pulling the plug on the Internet; or of the People’s Republic government in China blocking access to Google, in particular; or of American parents desperately installing V-chips to “protect” the children within the domestic group from X-rated material on the web.)

Here’s an interesting example of the complexity of the socio-spatio-temporal spaces of circulation even in small-scale society. I take my example from the continuing work of Don Brenneis on the Hindi-speaking community of Fijians in Bhatgaon. In his dissertation (Brenneis 1974) and in a series of illuminating articles (e.g., 1978, 1984a, 1984b, 1987, 1988, 1990) on what he terms “an ‘occasionally egalitarian’ society,” Brenneis provides us with rich material useful for conceptualizing the nature of interdiscursivity in the realm of community-level politics. The village of Bhatgaon is populated by descendants of people recruited to overseas indentured labor in the formerly British colony. People in this “occasionally egalitarian” community will report a generalized mutual respect for independence coupled with few mechanisms for direct, coercive political control. In such an environment, it is interesting that conflicts of interests do, in fact, get resolved by a kind of oscillating or dialectical mechanism of what we might call a negative and a positive ritual form of political action. I diagram this in figure 6.

The positive and public ritual site is easy to discern: it is the *pancayat*, or council of five, discursively unfolding as the formal presentation of grievances for one or another side of disputes, of clashing interests, of construals of issues where those pleading their cases find themselves in radical conflict. The *pancayat* is a formally organized oratorical occasion convened by those called *bada admi*, the “big men,” at which formal speeches are invited by the big men, delivered

<i>pancayat</i>	<i>talanoa</i>
Located at ceremonial center	Takes place in host’s private den
Oratorical high register Hindi	<i>Jangli bat</i> devalued slang Hindi
Big men participate and control	Non-big men participate
Resolves faction by status appeal	Makes potential faction interest
Enhances reputations	Potentially damages reputations
Conflictual past > irenic future	[] past > (?) conflictual future

Figure 6. *Pancayat* and *talanoa* as positive and negative moments of social circulation

by carefully chosen spokespersons on behalf of interests at loggerheads in a rhetorically fashioned register of Fijian Hindi, termed *shudh Hindi* “sweet Hindi,” which is, as Brenneis reports, “the language of religion, oratory and public events.” Everything here leads us to understand the *pancayat* as an orderly “poetic” of community politics, at which oratorical eloquence is supposed to work its effective magic.⁶ Poetic eloquence is locally expected to be appropriate to this use—soothing and restorative of what people can live with as a sufficient-enough resolution of conflicts that have been brewing.

But how do political conflicts ripen, as it were, to the point where they must be savored through oratorical eloquence in the positive, highly valued ritual site of the *pancayat*? There is another kind of event, negatively valued—in fact, a kind of anti- or counter-ritual form in which and through which issues are defined in a way by gaining adherents to a side. This is the *talanoa*, or adult men’s “gossip session.”

Small groups of generally related non-“big” men gather in early evening in someone’s *belo*, a thatch-roofed sitting house on someone’s property, and “have a few,” as we would say in Anglo-American culture. They drink *yaqona*, locally termed “grog,” the mildly narcotic drink that Polynesians term *kava* in their ceremonial life. Pleasantly relaxed, though not drunk in any sense as the drinking proceeds, such a men’s group addresses local issues—news of the day or week, as it were—in a generally multiparty conversation. (Talking politics in a neighborhood bar should come to mind as the nearest urban equivalent in contemporary America.)

Now none of this would be remarkable beyond the sociality of the occasion, except that the form—the “poetics,” if you will—of the conversational activity and the medium in which it occurs draw our interest by virtue of their potent indexical iconicity via interdiscursive—that is, circulatory—entanglements. *Talanoa*, male gossip, is rendered in the extreme negative opposite register of Fijian Hindi from the one used in the *pancayat*, the ritual occasion of resolution of issues. It is called *jangli bat* ‘jungle talk’, in essence, and it is specifically negatively viewed in the community, a kind of embarrassment of vernacular masculinity, perhaps to be compared with highly masculinizing local vernacular American English, sprinkled with off-color phrases, as “talking tough.” As opposed to the officially prized *shudh Hindi* of the *pancayat* speech maker, a register

6. Among numerous ethnographic examples of the ritual efficacy of oratorical poetics (Bloch 1975), note in particular Haviland’s (1996) exposition of Tzotzil marital squabbles, their adjudication, and at least resolution for the time being under the power of officiants’ parallelistic, couplet- and formula-laden ritual oratory, reinstating a poetic orderliness with which marital unions themselves are celebrated.

valued for “display[ing] a good knowledge of standard Fiji Hindi, a large Sanskrit vocabulary, and a knack for apposite parables,” *jangli bat* and its use in *talanoa* have a clear negative cachet: “men who excel in it are much appreciated” even though—or should we say because?—it “focus[es] on stigmatized subjects, using a[n officially] low prestige variety of Hindi”—“at the same time a source of shame and of rural pride” (Brenneis 1984a, 492–93). Real men get down!

In the course of their conversation over grog, men move in and out of episodes of *talanoa*. It is scandal, potentially embarrassing and to the detriment of someone or some interests not present at the moment of delivery, that forms the content of such talk. Who wants to have been responsible for telling such tales? Indeed, in an at least surface egalitarian community, pointed and explicit accusation against particular others would be very unwise, even in an intimate group of friends and relatives.

So what we find in the transcripts of *talanoa* sessions that Brenneis has provided is this: first, there is a low degree of explicit, orderly, and complete descriptive information, the kind, say, we claim that we value in expository communication and inculcate in institutions of learning. Half propositions, suggestive allusions, et cetera, abound: claims made about doings and sayings, but not attributed to anyone as agent or actor, are the dominant content. We would call this property of fragmented communication the *depleted referentiality and propositionality* of gossip discourse. Note, on the one hand, how this depletion figurates plausible deniability for whoever is uttering it—dishing the dirt, as it were. Note more importantly, on the other hand, that this means the various moment-to-moment coparticipating addressees of such discourse must already be considerably “in the know” about the scandalous doings and happenings to fill in missing referents and descriptive details.

See the adjacency pairs 2.4–2.5 on Brenneis’s (1984a, 501) transcript, reproduced here as figure 7, as well as 2.8–2.9. The speakers, HN and DD, are maternal parallel cousins and close friends, reviewing scandalous events of the night before causing Fijian police to be called to the community. Note how in line 2.4 DD gives the time as “nine o’clock,” immediately confirmed by HN, and then DD says that the two persons they are talking about were “totally drunk,” again confirmed and elaborated by HN, “fully drunk . . . [so that] they fought.” In 2.8 DD reports a crowd of thirty people, confirmed and with precision incremented by HN as thirty-two in 2.9. DD and HN are contributing detail upon detail about the incident, but from all their talk an outsider could not reconstruct a complete narrative. For example, whom are they talking about as the drunken instigators of all the hullabaloo?

THE POETICS OF POLITICS: "THEIRS" AND "OURS"

- 2.4 DD: NAU BAJE LAGBAG
Nine o'clock approximately
About nine o'clock.
- 2.5 HN:
 -
- 2.6 DD: DUNU KAT PIN.
Both totally drunk.
- 2.7 HN: **BOLE** DUNU PIN KAT **BOLE** BAS DONO LARAIN **BOLE**
Says both drunk fully says enough both fought says
Says both were quite drunk; says they fought with each other;
 PRAYA RAM **BOLE** BHAG JAO KADERIS **BOLE** GAYE RASI LEKE
Praya Ram says away go chased says went rope taking
says Praya Ram says scram and chased them; they went taking
 CHADKE JAMUN PED PE FASI LAGAO. CHOTU **BOLE** SAB GHARAWE
went jamun tree on noose fastened. Chotu says all house in
a rope and tied a noose on the jamun tree. Chotu says all were
 CHOTKANA JAI **BOLE** BAPA LOTIO JAB CHOTKANA
little fellow go says father returned when little fellow
at home, and the little guy says father is back; the little
 GAI **BOLE** LEKE CHURI RAPETIS CHOTKANA TO BHAGA GHAR
went says taking knife chased little fellow so fled house
guy left, says he took a knife and chased the little guy so
 E. CHOTKANA RAPETIS TO BHAGA CHAR E.
from. Little fellow chased so fled house from.
he fled the house. He chased the little guy so he fled
 U DARAWAT RAHA. BAS SAB RONA PITNA **BOLE** EK
He terrified was. Enough all crying drinking says one
He was terrified. So everyone was crying, drinking. Says
 TARAF SE CHILAI ROWAI KALI YAHA BIKARI GHAR LE ROYE
side from shout cry only there Bikari house at crying
from that side there was nothing but crying and shouting;
 SUNAI.
was heard.
they heard it as far away as Bikari's
- 2.8 DD: LONDE **BOLE** TIS JANNE HAMLOG GAWA.
Children says thirty people we went.
The children said more than thirty people went there.
- 2.9 HN: HA BAHUT **BOLE** TIS JANNE KOI GAYE TIS RAHA **BOLE**
Yes many says thirty people who went thirty were says
Yes, many people, says, says thirty, says thirty or
 TIS BATIS JANNE KE BOLAT RAHA GAYE **BOLE**
thirty thirty-two people of said had went says.
thirty-two people, he said, went there, says.
- 2.10 SN: **BOLE** GAYE HUAN KUCH PONC GAYEN KUCH DEVIDINLOG
Says gone had some arrived went some Devidin's folks
Says some had arrived as far as Devidin's house.
 KE GHAR LE. KUCH NARA TALAK GAYE BIKARI KE GHAR KE
of house to. Some ditch to went Bikari of house of
Some got as far as the ditch, some only as
 KOI DUI LADKE GAYE RAHA TALAK KALI. KUCH FIR LOTAIN.
some two boys gone had to only. Some again returned.
far as Bikari's house. Some went back home.
- 2.11 DD: **BOLE** HUWA JATJAT BATI KALAS BHUT GAYE. **BOLE** SAB
Says there going lanterns finished off went. Says all
Says that as they were going there the lights went out.
 SOYGAYA KALAS. PONCAT PONCAT
gone to sleep finished. Arriving arriving.
Says all had gone to sleep. Just as they were arriving.

Figure 1a. Transcript of a segment of *talanoa* featuring linked turns of participants, and dense use and rhythmic, end-line positioning preference for punctuating marker *bole*

Figure 7. Transcript of a *talanoa* fragment (Don Brenneis): collaborating on attenuated denotational detail. Reprinted from *American Ethnologist* 11, no. 3 (1984): 501. Used by permission of American Anthropological Association © 1984.

There is thus a threshold of knowledge that is presupposed as an “opportunity cost” of participation: a good *talanoa* ritual player, even as addressee, is someone who dominates the news, gathers it, and is ready to relay detail. As Brenneis observes, “The most striking feature of these [*talanoa*] transcripts is how difficult it would be to reconstruct the underlying events on the basis of the *talanoa* texts themselves. . . . Generally participants in *talanoa* sessions must come to them with some understanding of what is being discussed” (Brenneis 1984a, 494).

So if these sessions are not really informative, what are they? Here, a second aspect of the form of conversation emerges. *Talanoa* is marked by “rhythmic and rapid delivery,” the discourse “divide[d] . . . into syntactic and rhythmic chunks” of stress units “giving a pulsing feel to the *talanoa* as a whole. . . . Assonance and alliteration are quite marked, and exaggerated intonation contours and volume variation frequently occur.” As well, “repetition and near repetition of words and phrases are common, as are plays with word order” and lots of reduplicative forms (e.g., *polis-ulis* = “police”), exaggerating a tendency of *jangli Hindi*. The language is, in short, a poetry like our American English rap or hip-hop, in which, even across speaking turns, people have to jump into the rhythm of the talk, exercising a facility for artistically shaping their own contribution to it.

As seen in figure 8, the time marker of the verbal beat of this rhythmic delivery is the form *bole*, structurally (grammatically) the third-person singular present of the verb *to say*: thus, “he/she says.” In *talanoa* this form occurs so often it no longer actually means “he/she says”; it has become what from the perspective of textual organization we call a *discourse marker* (Schiffrin 1987), punctuating breath-group and other discursively functional segments of utterance as do *like*, *ya know*, *I mean*, *ain’ it*, and so forth in vernacular American English. “Frequently stressed and lengthened vis-à-vis the rest of the text”—which is rapidly delivered in oral performance—it is a kind of phrasal measuring device that occurs not only in the middle of turns at talk but especially at the beginnings of turns and at the ends of turns when its utterance shows that the floor has now become available for another speaker to jump in. This is shown very well in 2.12, 2.18–2.19, 2.20–2.21 in the transcript reproduced from Brenneis (1984a, 502) in figure 8.

From the perspective of its denotative meaning, *bole* is what we term a *quotative particle*; we might translate it “*they say*, [pause] (*that . . .*)” (extra stress and perhaps rising-falling intonation on *say*), with generalized *they* that has no actual denotational antecedent, or “*one héárs* [pause] (*that . . .*)” putting the

- 2.12 HN: HA. **BOLE** EKDUM GHAR ME SAKIT **BOLE**
 Yes. Says immediately house at arrived says
 Yes. Says that just as soon as they got to the house, says
 VAJRA DEO NIKALGAYA.
 Vajra Deo came out.
 Vajra Deo came out.
BOLE POLIS. . . .
 says police. . . .
- BOLE** PRAYA RAM POLIS ME GAYA RAHA
 Says Praya Ram police to gone had
 Says Praya Ram had gone to the police
- 2.13 DD: HA, TO. . . .
 Yes, then. . . .
- 2.14 HN: AYA RAHIN DIN ME **BOLE** ADMIOLOG SOCIN **BOLE** PRAYA RAM
 Come had day in says men thought says Praya Ram
 The police came today. Says people thought, says Praya Ram
 NAHI RAHIT TO AUR JANNELOG SOCE RAHIN **BOLE** KI KAHE
 not was so and people thought had says that told
 wasn't there, and people thought, says, that he'd
 ETNA GAON KE NI ETNA DOR KE GAYE RAHIN JANTA.
 such village of in such run of gone had know
 never heard of such running around in a village.
- 2.15 DD: KON KON MAMALA RAHA?
 What what trouble was?
 What was it all about?
- KAHE **BOLE**
 Told says. . . .
 I've heard. . . .
- 2.16 HN: HA. **BOLE** ILOG KE **BOLE** U KAR
 Yes. Says they of says he done
 Yes. Says of them, says he did
- DIN ILOG DOR KI GAYIN TO DEKHIN PRAYA RAM APNE GAYA.
 had they run of went so saw Praya Ram self went.
 something. They fled running so he saw Praya Ram himself go
- 2.17 DD: PRAYA RAM BATIS. . . .
 Praya Ram said. . . .
- BOLE**
 says. . . .
- 2.18 HN: BIKARI BOLET RAHA.
 Bikari said had.
 Bikari had said.
- 2.19 DD: **BOLE** BAHUT GUSSAN BOLAT RAHA TUMLOG CELLE JAO **BOLE**.
 Says very angry said had you/pl) leave go says.
 Says he said, very angrily, for them to leave at once.
BOLE FIR ROHIT RAHA PRAYA RAM **BOLE** KA KARI. . . . U
 says again cried had Praya Ram says what doing. . . . He
 Says they cried again; Praya Ram says what are you doing?
 BATAWAT RAHA BESWA GAYA RAHA **BOLE** LATCHMI UDHAR SE AWE
 said had Beswa gone had says Latchmi there from came
 He said Beswa had gone; says Latchmi had not come from
 NAHI.
 not.
 over there.
- 2.20 HN: HA.
 Yes
- 2.21 DD: **BOLE** CELLE JAO NAHI TO CHURI-URI MAR DI **BOLE** EKDUM
 Says leave go not then knife hit give says totally
 Says leave at once or I'll hit you with my knife. Says
 PACALEN HEI NAHI?
 crazy are not?
 they're totally mad, aren't they?
- 2.22 HN: HA.
 Yes.

Figure 1b. Transcript of a segment of *talanoa* featuring linked turns of participants, and dense use and rhythmic, end-line positioning preference for punctuating marker *bole*

Figure 8. Transcript of *talanoa* fragment (Don Brenneis): *bole* as metricalizing device. Reprinted from *American Ethnologist* 11, no. 3 (1984): 502. Used by permission of American Anthropological Association © 1984.

onus for the stench being uttered about someone on the generalized community, as though indeed Kant's (cf. Habermas 1989, 89–140) “public opinion” has informed the current utterer of the bad tidings. I like to think of this rap or word-jazz game in the image of a jump-rope round, where children have to jump out of and into the rhythm of the turning rope without getting fouled up by stepping on it or by getting hit by it. It requires some skill.

So it is *rhythmically co-constructed* stylized gab or talk that is occurring in *talanoa*, not a good, complete, orderly co-constructed story but a co-construction of what is not said, a co-construction of what is mutually presupposable and hence not in need of actual elaboration. That is the discourse form, whatever the empirical actuality of some participant's knowing or not knowing. To participate you must be able to indicate by your own co-construction that you already know; to participate is to register a mutual alignment with the “voicing,” as Bakhtin (1981, 275–366) would term it, of the guy who has already spoken, taking up the story at hand from the perspective emerging in the intersubjective space of co-construction. To hear the story in what is being said, you must know the story, and you should be able to throw in your own little contribution to the emerging skeleton of a story line to ratify your right to hear more. One is never actually the Goffmanian (1979, 17) “author” of the details, moreover; one is merely the “animator” of them in the instance, relaying what, by silent assent in the gossip group, must clearly have been on everyone's lips in prior conversation that is at least formally indexed by the quotative particle: “I'm not telling you this, but . . . !”

The poetics of participation is, in short, a figuration, a trope, a metaphor—a diagrammatic icon—of the participants' likeness-of-alignment to the way some scandal is being narratively formulated with an intersubjective voice of negative evaluation. In short, one's collusion—to use the negative word for collaboration—in fashioning as the *denotational text* an emergently group-based account with negative evaluational stance indexically counts as creative co-participation in the very coming into being of a potential political faction in respect of some issue or situation that will likely face the community as a whole or some significant interests in it. *Talanoa* is the negative ritual among small groups of men where political interests about particular issues come into being, necessitating, as they may in some cases persist and ripen—or fester, to use a disease image—the eventual constitution of a *pancayat*, the ritual event for airing the social wound and cleansing it in its own poetic order of elegant sweetness.

Small-scale egalitarian politics—even “occasionally egalitarian” politics—is factional politics, the spectral coming-into-being of which causes official anxiety

and the search for remedies. *Talanoa* analyzed as an event of social action with its own characteristic poetic form of participation gives us the key to how faction comes discursively into being about particular issues. It may be officially negatively valued and hence denied as part of the political process—note the widespread notion in Western societies that “men don’t gossip,” for example—but it is the very first engine stroke in the reciprocating system that is the mechanism in place for the politics of Bhatgaon and other such communities. *Talanoa* as an event is a ritual microcosm and metaphor of the macro-social form of political factionalism, which can come into being as men are drawn into co-constructing a far-from-disinterested account of something with strong community involvement and potentially multiple interests.

Brenneis’s material is fascinating because lurking right beneath the surface of this acephalous (no-head person in the government apparatus) egalitarian (presumptively non-status-differentiated) household-based (extended families dwelling in compounds) village community are processes that both depend on social differentiation and constantly reorder such social differentiations. Men, and especially heads of households, are recognized as the prime political actors, with their very visible and deferred-to statuses always nervously at stake notwithstanding the ideology of equality. Young men affiliate with the older men as kinds of political clients, especially via kinship relations (as in supporting one’s nuclear and extended family). Official political acts, such as *pancayat*, the dispute resolution “council of five,” reveal these status asymmetries, of course, because the whole procedure is an attempt to soothe ruffled and damaged status claims, not to probe truth and falsity. But as we see, unofficial but pervasive *talanoa* always has the potential to be directed to ruffling and damaging those claims. The *talanoa* form, in a chain of interlocking such performances, is a locus of what we might term the cumulation of detail into a factional “charter myth” about potentially rival or counterposed others, sometimes denoted only by association with a big man, who may be named, all in the voice of mere ratification of thoughts and views of those anonymous others whom one alludes to and cites in the course of making (up) the narrative. As Brenneis (quoted in Silverstein 2005c, 21–22 n. 4) noted for me about Bhatgaon, “egalitarian politics in Bhatgaon at least is shaped in large part by the anticipatory fear of factional politics (or *parti-walla kam*, as it is locally known). My consultants saw factions (*partis*) as ongoing and problematic in those villages where they had flourished (and at a few times in the Bhatgaon past). It was, I think, one of the reasons that a goal in conflict was not so much to recruit adherents as to find third-party audiences who could provide the events in which a conflict would not so much be resolved as the

commensurate social worth and reputation of its parties (in our sense) publicly displayed and vindicated. In any case, in local commentary, *parti-walla kam* [was] very much something to be avoided. . . . Factionalism was always a possibility but, during my own fieldwork at least, not an ongoing feature of local social organization (it rather, I would say, haunted the social scene through the fact of its possibility).” I trust we can now see vividly the communicational infrastructure thereof in one of its circulatory manifestations.

* * *

Finally, let us turn to the *emanation* of semiotic, of cultural value through the socio-spatio-temporal structures that are defined in and by trajectories of communication. My example starts from—it emanates from—wine and its culture in contemporary American society. My theme here is not enological and viticultural as such; it is cultural in a more general sense, using wine and its contemporary framing as exemplification of how culture operates in our institutionally complex communicational environment.

I introduce the kind of phenomenon I am talking about starting with the following swatch or sample of what for us, people with a certain wide experience of English prose, is an unmistakable textual genre:

First tasted in 1963. Surprisingly soft and lovely on the palate even in the mid-1960s but the nose curiously waxy and dumb, developing its characteristic hot, earthy/pebbly bouquet only latterly. Ripe, soft, lovely texture, but not as demonstrably or obtrusively a '61 as the other first growths. Fine, gentlemanly, understated.

It is demonstrably and obtrusively a wine-tasting note—in fact, one of the thousands published in 1980 by Sir Michael Broadbent (1980, 81), whose evaluations set prices for Christie’s auction house for many years. English speakers outside of the social fields where such discourse is the norm can recognize the special quality, the “fine, gentlemanly, understated” quality of this kind of language, but as is characteristic of technical and other kinds of registers, only a much smaller number can actually produce equivalent prose in the register that would make sense to the insiders. As a kind of text, the well-formed wine-tasting note is highly structured. Its narrative line follows what connoisseurs understand to be the dimensions of aesthetic experience and evaluation that serially or temporally structure one’s perceptual encounter with the obscure object of enological desire, as shown in figure 9. In fact, analysis of hundreds of such tasting notes allows us to lay out in diagrammatic form what Sir Michael had to say about

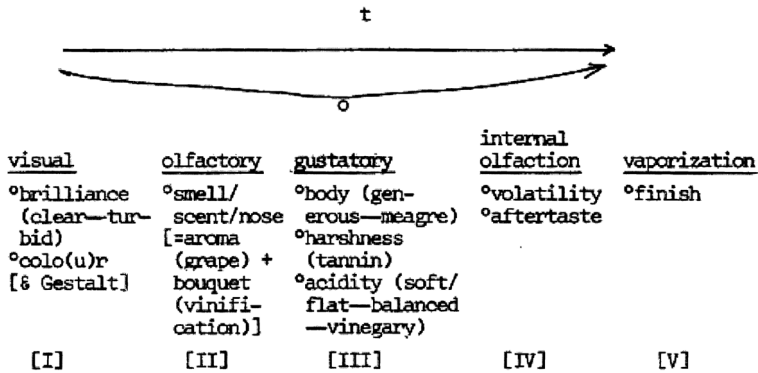


Figure 9. Phases of the aesthetic encounter with wine. Reproduced from *Current Anthropology* 45, no. 5 (2004): 641, fig. 8.

Château Haut-Brion 1961, a claret of the Graves district of Bordeaux, on tasting in November 1979. As in figure 10, we can diagram the way the very orderliness of this “spontaneous” bit of English prose in fact follows its rigid structural pattern.

What I have done in this diagram is to separate on the right the phrases composed of the technical terms professionals use for each of the dimensions along which they evaluate the substance. For example, under Stage II, *nose*, Broadbent was surprised to find the smell *waxy* and initially difficult to discern

Château Haut-Brion, 1961

[A. Placement in history of acquaintance/connoisseurship] First tasted in 1963.

[B. Perduring characteristics of such occasions – summary note (stage III)]

[C. Tasting note per se]

[II:]

[III:]

lovely

lovely
but not as demonstrably
or obtrusively a '61

Gentlemanly, understated.

Surprisingly *soft* and
on the **palate** even
in the mid-1960s

but the **nose** curiously
waxy and *dumb*,
developing
its characteristic
hot, earthy/pebbly
bouquet
only latterly.

Ripe, soft

texture,
as the other first
growths.
Fine [cf. **finesse**],

Figure 10. Textual structure of a wine-tasting note (Broadbent 1980, 91). Adapted from *Current Anthropology* 45, no. 5 (2004): 642, fig. 9a.

(“*dumb*”) but later was reassured to experience the “*hot, earthy/pebbly*”-ness of the *bouquet* component of scent, the one presumed to come from the techniques of vinification of its particular grape (merlot and cabernet sauvignon). There are what we term *taxonomies* of characteristics for each dimension, among the members of which a taster distinguishes. A maximal note records values along all five dimensions, in their proper order; a more telescoped or minimal one generally concentrates on Stage III, for which there are the most taxonomic differentiators, and perhaps as well Stage II.

Now in addition to such highly organized technical terminologies of evaluative connoisseurship, there are other bits of prose, as I have separated to the left of the textual diagram. These tend to be characterological, almost anthropomorphic, and bespeak, by their use, a kind of assumed social position on the part of the user we nowadays associate with the rarefied precincts of male clubby culture in the city and, on weekends, with great estates and country clubs of tony suburbia and exurbia. My research reveals, however, that it is these vocabulary and phrases that those who live socially distant from enological pursuits actually identify as the verbal register of “wine talk” and about which there is the usual kind of class-associated anxiety peaking in the lower-to-mid bourgeoisie—as is the case for many realms of connoisseurship. Perhaps you have seen the famous 1944 *New Yorker* drawing by James Thurber with a caption quoting a dinner party host as he tastes the wine he has served, noting for his disconcerted guests, “It’s a naïve domestic burgundy without any breeding, but I think you will be amused by its presumption.” All of this talk is characterological phraseology, all stuff from the left-side of the diagram, but richly communicative of the predicament of the anxious readership of would-be wine aficionados for whom Thurber’s joke still resonates. (There are still takeoffs on television sitcoms these days; recall the fate of Magritte’s non-pipe.)

Now, as an anthropologist I am concerned with how, in modern life, people approach commodities such as edibles and potables as a function of such normative cultural schemes that direct their perception of the qualities culture makes salient, qualities by which they classify, categorize, and come to judge the good from the bad—not only the things they ingest but as well those they wear, drive, or make use of in other ways in their daily lives.

As a linguist, I am further concerned with the meanings of words and expressions by which people communicate with one another. In such communication, even the same word-form can be associated with many different conceptual schemes depending on socially recognized expertise; think of what we term the “technical meanings” of otherwise ordinary words, like lattice, or bouquet,

and contrastively think of words known only among those with certain “technical knowledge,” such as *muon* or *climat*.

In effect, then, using a word or expression in a certain way in an event of communication frequently does double classificatory work. A word used in a certain descriptive way categorizes or classifies both things-in-the-denotable-world (whether “real” or fictive/imagined), to be sure; it indexes a schema of *qualia* (see now Chumley and Harkness 2013). But additionally, the particular differential application of the word at the same time reveals—it points to, or indexes—the social identity, the category of person, who would stereotypically invoke such a use of the word. This is an example of what we term the *register effect* of such linguistic variety (which is, by the way, universal in all known language communities). In what follows I will return several times to this bivalent quality of words and expressions as also to the nonverbal semiotics that mediate classifications of things and persons; for the strength and institutional entrenchment of such a lexical register effect along with its associated nonverbal signs turns out to be key to understanding the observable spread or emanation of wine-talk, or “oinoglossia,” as I have dubbed it.

My point is that wine as a prestige comestible manifests a well-developed register effect not only in language but in a large number of penumbral sign systems that frame the production, circulation, consumption, and memorialization of this substance and people’s relation to it. And, this register effect is spreading, or has been spreading, from the domain—the *domaine*, if you will!—of the enological to draw in any comestible that aspires to distinction, that is, that aspires at the same time to confer distinction upon its consumer. In terms of the framing of myriad other comestibles undergoing stimulated stratification by prestige, a kind of semiotic “vinification”—turning them into metaphorical wine—has been taking place both in the language surrounding them and in the other sign systems by which we make their virtues known, for example in the visual codes of advertising.

In other words, the institutional world of wine has become a center point of “emanation” of ways of constructing prestige throughout a whole world of constructible comestibles, edible and potable commodities that are brought into the stratified precincts in which wine has long had a social life. So today, just as one can be admired/reviled, imitated/shunned for being a “wine snob” (a folk term of opprobriousness from outside the fold), so also can one find a parallel place in the universe of experiencers of coffee, beer, cheese, ice cream, olive oil, vodka, et cetera—examples in my data of all those things that through artisanal labor represent nature turned into culture. Let me illustrate this process of value-

emanation, which transfers the register effect of bidirectional, thing-human co-categorization to any such commodity now claiming the possibility of stratified prestige. We will see that we are—sociologically speaking—what we communicate about what we eat or drink.

Wine is, as it were, an agricultural product with the potential to be rendered into potable art and thus is stratified as a commodity from the low or vulgar registers—think of Thunderbird—to upper reaches perceivable aesthetically only through knowledgeable connoisseurship, articulated through a whole critical apparatus of expertise and experience, like any art form, such as among those who can differentiate in blind tasting the more easterly and westerly vineyards of a particular year's La Tâche or Côte Rôtie. Setting the growing and vinification of grapes aside, the central events of value-setting in the aesthetic appreciation of wine are centered on consuming wine and communicating—talking—about the consumption experience. Hence we can understand what lies behind the splendid cartoon by the *New Yorker* magazine's satirist of the WASP Upper East Side of Manhattan, William Hamilton, reproduced here as figure 11. One “drinks” mere beverages; one “gets” great art.

“Getting” great art, and being able to distinguish it from not-so-great art, requires the practiced aesthetic talents of a connoisseur, the more subtle the aesthetic faculties, the more exquisitely near sublimity the experience; the more re-



“Sure, they drank it—but did they get it?”

Figure 11. Wine: consumption vs. connoisseurship (William Hamilton). *New Yorker* cartoonbank.com, cartoon image no. 42156, reprinted by permission.

warding the investment, as it were, of the aesthetic inclination and training. A perhaps even daily occasion for the ordinary wine drinker, an interaction with the art object, is thus implicitly infused with meanings and values that intersect a number of institutionalized networks of communication of knowledge; using the discourse and other semiotics of wine lies at the intersection of three great macro-institutions of our society, the interaction of which shapes the communicational networks determining how we think and talk about wine.

One such institutional force is that of applied science, in particular enological and viticultural sciences such as soil science, botany, organic chemistry, and human psychophysiology. A second is aesthetic connoisseurship in the world of collecting, auctions, “capital appreciation,” as it were, ranging from the professional through the serious avocational to the rank amateur or even happenstance wine drinker. A third is retail marketing of commodity circulation of so-called life-style commodities, that is, personal-value-conferring commodities of domestic consumption, in which “brand,” for example, has become so important as an index of distinction. Each of these institutional sources endows the wine consumer’s reflective engagement with a distinctive register effect that, my materials show, has been spreading from wine to other comestibles.

First, from the applied science institution emanates the notion that we respond psychophysically to the “raw data” of empirical reality in ways that can be isolated, dimensionalized, numerically measured, and then terminologically standardized by laboratory methods, defining an orderly perceptual space within which the sensorium operates. This would do for the phases of wine perception outlined in figure 9 much the same as has been achieved in other areas of sensory perception; note pitch, loudness, and harmonic overtone structure for sound (related to the physical wave frequency, amplitude, and dispersion of acoustic energy in a signal), or the perceptual space of hue—saturation—brightness for ‘color’ characteristics of light in the visible spectrum. A particularly interesting and influential example of the analogical transfer is the “standard system of wine aroma terminology,” from the University of California, Davis, School of Viticulture and Enology, as shown in figure 12. It is, of course, just a three-node taxonomy of kinds of aromas; each pie-shaped area is really a set of paths from the center point, essentially undifferentiated aroma, to more and more specific kinds. Particularly in an environment of a consuming bourgeoisie trained and credentialed for their very livelihoods, used to thinking in terms of a psychophysics of the reactive self, the idea that one can achieve degrees of dimensionalized precision like this in one’s wine connoisseurship as a kind of applied science is, of course, very natural and appealing.

A modified version of the wine aroma wheel has been constructed to clarify and improve the proposed list of standardized wine aroma terminology. The order of terms has been reorganized to facilitate its use. Terms describing the "nutty" aromas in wine have been added. In addition, reference standards are suggested to define

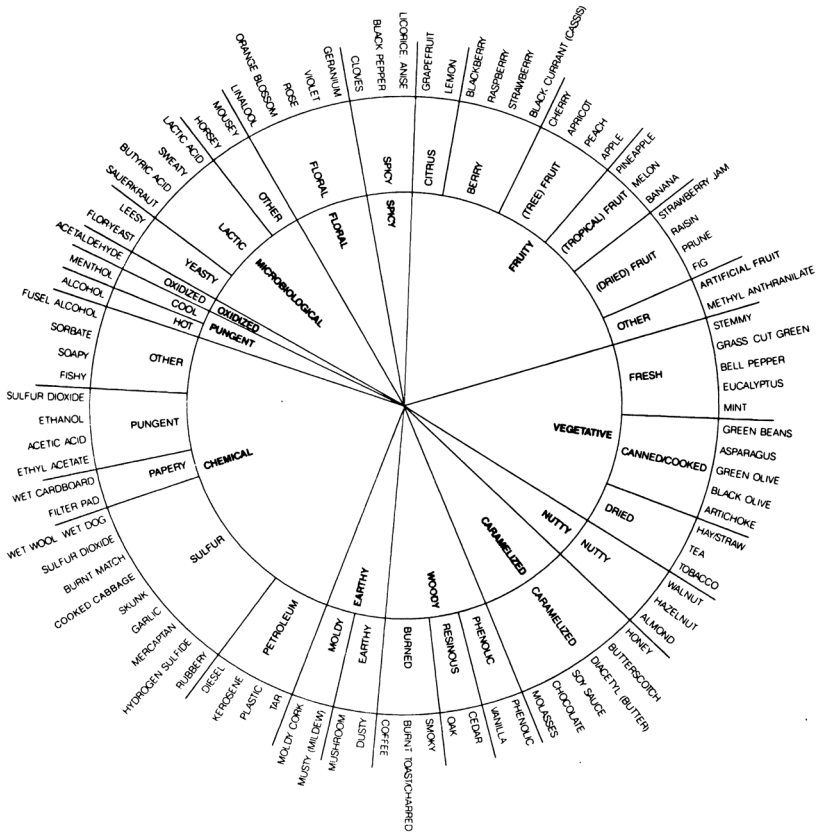


Figure 12. Standardized terminology of the “wine aroma wheel” (A. C. Noble et al.). *American Journal of Enology and Viticulture* 38, no. 2 (1987): 143, fig. 1. © Ann C. Noble. Used by permission.

And being so appealing, seeming to give a rock-solid empirical basis in laboratory chemistry to terms of aesthetic connoisseurship, the aroma taxonomy has spawned many repetitions and imitations, first via admiring circulation by wine critics in newspapers, in magazines, and on websites. Figure 13 shows Noble and colleagues’ “aroma wheel” reproduced by Patrick Fegan in his syndicated wine column. Figure 14, by Ronn Wiegand in the aficionado magazine *Wine and Spirits*, spreads to the rice-derived wine sake the concept of a differential taxonomy of descriptors displayed in wheel form. At a slightly later period, as micro-breweries were coming definitively into the consumer consciousness, note an imitation wheel—combining aroma and flavor

THE BEER FLAVOR WHEEL

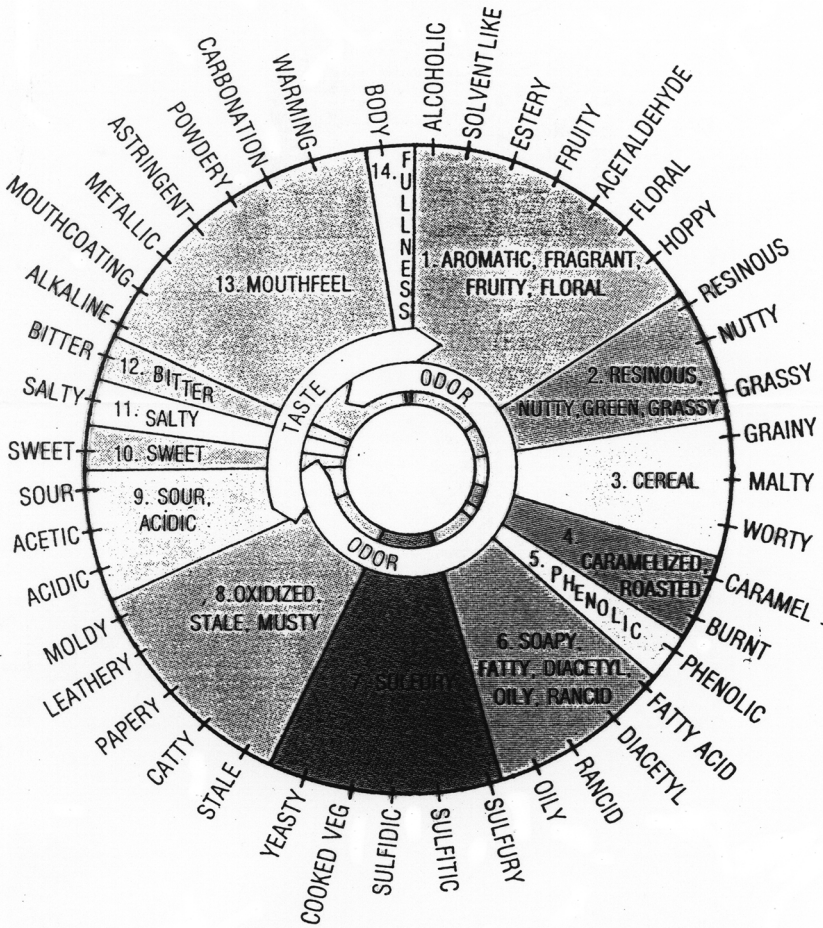


Figure 15. The beer flavor wheel. © American Society of Brewing Chemists. Used by permission.

taxonomies in a single circular display—even for beer in figure 15, bringing this drink (and its consuming public) formerly culturally opposed to wine into the aesthetic fold.

For indeed the second broadly institutionalized realm intersected in enophily is, to be sure, aesthetic connoisseurship and the “communities of practice” it engages around any particular focus of attention organizing, at least in part, one’s style of life. The analogue is, of course, art connoisseurship (as made clear in William Hamilton’s cartoon in fig. 11). There are professional connoisseurs

who set price in the art market, and these people are valued for the subtlety of their judgment in discerning and projecting futurities amid all the risks to collectors and other avocational enthusiasts who are, at the same time, investors in a commodity that accrues monetary value in the market. Just as there are published the *Wine Spectator* and the *Wine Advocate* and, according to the Google search engine as of July 2013, 14,800,000 sites accessible through the expression wine appreciation and 1,130,000,000 through the expression wine terms,⁷ so also do we now have the *Beer Advocate*, the *Malt Advocate* (i.e., [scotch] whiskey), the *Cheese Advocate*, and so forth, both in print and online. The imitative parallelism—how these forms of avocational fandom mimic that of wine—is extraordinary.

The third macro-institution is life-style retailing, which relies on the existence of the first two. What you are in consumption class is what you eat, drink, wear, et cetera—and what you consciously discover you have to think or say about the experience. In such retailing, a product that can be a performative emblem of distinction always hovers between total individuation of an artisanal experience and the repetition of brand dependability, of course. Total individuation in wine gets down to the level of the individual bottle; the best enological connoisseurs facing the most rarefied of wines operate at this level. (Note how this cultural concept of distinctiveness informs the practice, at serving, of never filling a glass with bottle number two if there is still present in the glass some of wine of bottle number one, for example. Even where it is ridiculous not to do so, it is an indexically pregnant gesture of interdiscursive reference to the top-and-center of viticultural distinction.) At the other extreme, it is brand, brand, brand that is the principle of marketing, like the mass-produced couturier lines that self-advertise on the products themselves.⁸ At the middle ranges of the wine market in the United States, brandedness is the key to marketing; the consumer must be made to feel the equivalent—for wine, certainly anchored in France and French—of prominently showing off a Prada article of clothing on the body, or a Miele dishwasher in the fabulously up-to-date kitchen. In this light, look at the clever Clos du Bois ad in figure 16 which, summoning to consciousness what we might term the wine brand's "Frenchness," of which a host serving it

7. An earlier Google search, done almost four years earlier on October 1, 2009, yielded 422,000 sites keyed by wine appreciation and 25,300,000 by wine terms, giving some sense of either the phenomenal growth of online information, as consumerist desire in this realm reaches out to the trendy newer media, or of the efficiency of the search engine, or some combination of both.

8. For illuminatingly semiotic discussions of "brand," see Moore (2003), Manning (2010), and Nakassis (2012), the latter in particular worrying the "citational" (Nakassis 2013) nature of branded commodities.

“CLO DEW BWAH. TRAY SHEEK.”



FROM SONOMA COUNTY.
NOT FRANCE.

Figure 16. The “Frenchness” of wine illustrated. © 1996 Clos Du Bois Winery

to guests can be proud, notwithstanding emphasizes its—surprise!—Californian provenance.

The emanation of these cultural forms constructing wine with exceedingly high register effects to other *prestige comestibles* (and their connoisseurs) is, in fact coming to define what a prestige comestible is. Early on in the Starbucks coffee phenomenon, for example, the company circulated a “take one” newsletter educating its consumer-customers about the rarefied purchasing experience they were having at Starbucks. As can be seen in figure 17, the prose of these informative—indeed, educational—materials takes the genred form of wine-tasting notes: “seductive” Ethiopian Sidamo has “flowery bouquet (with a hint of eucalyptus), light and elegant body, and a honeyed natural sweetness”; Har-rar’s “Chiantiesque, slightly gamy aroma” gives it “a certain rustic charm” as “a

Mocha Sanani: “Properly brewed [as espresso] ... combines unrivalled intensity of aroma with thick, creamy body and bittersweet chocolate finish.”

Ethiopia Sidamo: “...a delicate yet sprightly new crop coffee... . Flowery bouquet (with a hint of eucalyptus), light and elegant body, and a honeyed natural sweetness...one of the most seductive of all African varieties.”

Kenya ‘AA’: “At the very top of the mountain (literally and figuratively) [t]his coffee, like a fine Bordeaux, balances heft and heartiness with bell-like clarity of flavor and blackcurrant fruitiness.”

Ethiopia Harar: “...a carefully cultivated coffee with a flavor that’s usually anything **but** cultivated! The Chianti-esque, slightly gamy aroma gives Harar a certain rustic charm that has family ties to Mocha Sanani (though it usually lacks that coffee’s complexity, balance and breed). It is... ‘a coffee for people who like excitement at the cost of subtlety’.”

Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Malawi: “...better used in blends than as varieties, since their flavors, while pleasant, are much less clearly delineated...”

Figure 17. Kevin Knox’s tasting notes on African varietal coffees (*Inside Scoop*, June–July 1991, 2. Starbucks Coffee Co.). © 1991 Starbucks Coffee Company. Quoted by permission.

coffee for people who like excitement at the cost of subtlety.” And speaking of subtlety, what could be less subtle in analogical form, as revealed in figure 18, than the full-page glossy magazine advertisement for Colombian coffee—a coffee varietal that is, we should surely appreciate, akin to wine itself in its most characteristically French denomination, an AOC, *appellation d’origine contrôlée*.

Every prestige comestible is now wrapped in oinoglossia, wine talk, some literally. Here, in figure 19, is the wrapper of one of Lindt’s chocolate bars. It teaches the consumer that chocolate must be aesthetically perceived just like

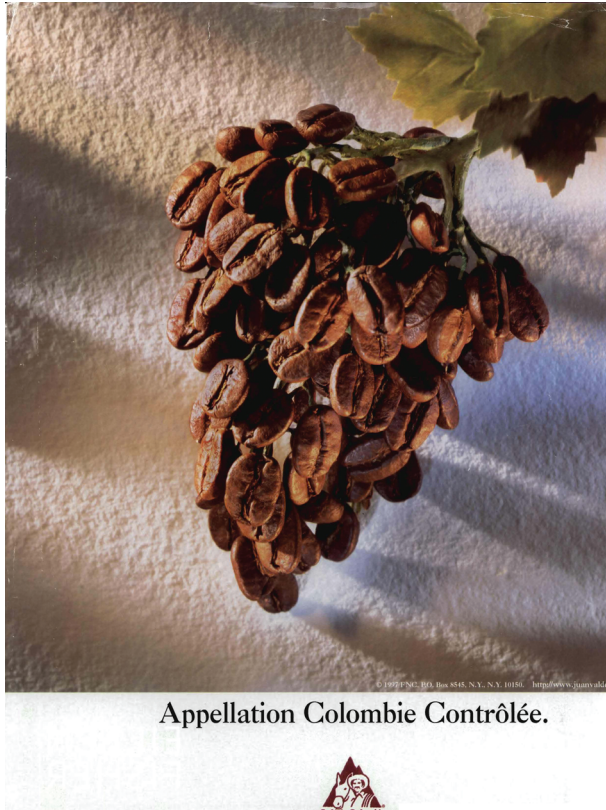


Figure 18. Colombian coffee in the image of French wine. © 1997 Federación Nacional de Cafeteros de Colombia.

wine, through stages of apperceptive evaluation—sight, break-feel, aroma, taste, aftertaste—in which, of course, this brand will be seen to be the best.

As we can see, from wine emanates a notion of what it is to be part of the prestige economy of aesthetic comestibles, people and things linked therein, in which all the signs from language on out are deeply enmeshed in register effects that construct both the comestible and at the same time the consumer in a system of cultural values that is still growing—like good vines. And even beyond humans: figure 20 is an image of the impeccable taste appropriately enough imagined to be enregistered by the noble king of beasts.

Finally, it is important to note that such cultural processes of enveloping semioticization have a temporality such that what is happening at the institutional center of emanation may be already shifting just as its influence is being



Figure 19. A chocolate tasting note on the wrapping of a product of Lindt & Sprüngli Ltd., *chocolatiers*



"I'm getting esophagus notes with a bouquet of red and white blood cells and a bitter spinal-cord aftertaste."

Figure 20. A tasting note by the noblest of beasts (Paul Wood). *New Yorker* cartoonbank.com, cartoon image no. 8544718, reprinted by permission.

felt elsewhere in social space-time. Thus, on September 9, 2009, the *New York Times's* wine critic, Eric Asimov, wrote about the populist proletarianization of wine connoisseurship on the online video blog of one Gary Vaynerchuk, proprietor of The Wine Library (formerly Shopper's Discount Liquor in Springfield, New Jersey, a couple of miles west of Newark Airport). As revealed in figure 21, Everyman—to use the medieval generic name—is here revealed to be a prole connoisseur in the illustrative photo shoot: open-shirted, tieless, expressive-faced, perhaps visibly ethnic, tasting wine in the upstairs storeroom. You, Everyman, can borrow taste from The Wine Library! And on the very same day, Thomas Conner of the *Chicago Sun-Times* wrote about “tea sommeliers,” tea-tasting ritual, stylistically vinified tea merchants elegantly dressed and elegant of ritual, and the emergence of regimes of certification of expertise parallel to that of wine experts by the American Tea Masters Association, a self-proclaimed certifying board. Observe the dress, the comportment, the demeanor exemplified in figure 22: is that emanation, or what? The waves in the pond of culture continue to ripple at the circumference of the circular undulations created where the stone is first dropped in—perhaps, to mix the metaphor, leaving us with an ironic aftertaste.



HIS OWN WAY Gary Vaynerchuk's video blog has made him plenty of fans, many new to wine.

Figure 21. Gary Vaynerchuk of The Wine Library videotaping his wine blog. Richard Perry/*New York Times*/Redux. Used by permission.

Especially in institutionally complex and mass social formations, emanations proceed simultaneously from many competing centers of regimentation; indeed, they must operate in a socio-spatio-temporality somewhat slower and more scale-encompassing than mere interdiscursivity as such, mere circulation, which is the semiotic infrastructure and medium of emanation.



Figure 22. Rod Markus, a “tea sommelier,” examines a brewing pot of tea. Keith Hale/*Chicago Sun-Times*/Redux. Used by permission.

So there you have it: whatever one might want to call ‘cultural’ manifests in this trimodal semiotic. As anthropologists we may be attracted to one of them but always find that we must take account of the other two in order really to locate, to find, “culture.” Phenomenally and epistemologically semiotic signification emerges in the first instance in events of discursive interaction, though as we’ve seen, to explain the interactional text frequently involves at least understanding the interdiscursivities of circulation. Circulation as such encompasses a social organization of communication, frequently and especially as institutionalized across structural sites that are implicitly referenced—in *renvoi* and in *prolepsis*—in some particular site we seek to understand and interpret. And finally, emanation defines an overall structure of tiered nodes in a network of sites of practice, generative centers of semiosis and paths to their peripheries. In or through such emergent structures, semiotic value via genres of textuality, ever of the moment, flows and intersects that coming from other generative centers, such that complex cultural forms as experienced are inevitably multiply determined from several such centers of emanation. Wine and its oinoglossic registers of verbal, visual, et cetera, semiosis seem socio-historically to have crystalized at such an intersection, as we have seen, and we have caught it as it, in turn,

has seemed to emerge as a relatively autonomous center of emanation, semiotically informing the more general stratification of consumption.

We have moved away from the essentializing and enumerating concept of culture(s) as distinctive “stuff” to the contemporary semiotic world of cultural processes. Yet even in this semiotic world the ontological claim to unique cultures (see Silverstein 2005b) has itself become a genred discursive form asserting “locality” (Appadurai 1996, 178–99) that emanates from numerous interested centers and spreads accordingly as it licenses such claims. But one hopes that contemporary sociocultural anthropology and any of its allied meta-semiotics escape these emanations at an analytic plane all the while recognizing them as a force in the circulation and signification of “culture.”

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