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between Teachers and Administrators in an American High School**



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culture as rhetoric: patterning in the verbal interpretation of interaction between teachers and administrators in an American high school

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Ancient Greek, obviously, did not determine the metaphysical definition of "being." The language did however make of "being" an objectifiable notion which philosophical reflection could manipulate, analyze and situate as it could do for any other concept (Benvéniste 1966:71, my translation).

Ever since Boas's¹ students insisted on the utility of postulating the existence of phenomena they referred to as "cultural," the history of cultural anthropology can be seen as a search for the actual location of the impulse in the experiential world that gave rise to the original intuition of "culture." From Benedict's "patterns" to Parsons's "value orientations," to Geertz's and David Schneider's "systems of meanings and symbols," anthropologists have shifted the postulated location of the experiential impulse as serious difficulties became apparent in the older phrasing. And yet the intuition remains that, in Lévi-Strauss's words:

without challenging the undeniable primacy of infrastructures, there always is, between *praxis* and practices, a mediator which is the conceptual schema by the operation of which a matter and a form, both lacking in independent existence accomplish each other as structures, that is to say as, at the same time, empirical and intelligible beings (my translation; appears in the University of Chicago translation 1966:130).

Not all cultural anthropologists would quite agree with Lévi-Strauss's characterization of the mediator between praxis and practices, but they would generally agree with the idea that human beings do not encounter the world directly and that the world would not "exist" in a properly human way without the mediation of symbolic and intellectual processes. In other words, the world would not be intelligible.

But this is not yet quite concrete enough and thus not an ultimately appropriate specification of the place in the world where we must look to analyze intelligibility, symbols, or culture. What I would like to do in this paper is explore a way into the operationalization of the intuition of culture that is predicated not so much on what cultural anthropologists have said they were doing as on what they have actually done. And what they have done is operate, more or less consciously, but quite persistently, on linguistic and paralinguistic material. In other words, I would make mine a remark Benvéniste made about psychoanalysis: "the analyst operates on what the subject *tells* him" (1966: 75). This

Six "texts" produced by the staff of an American high school are analyzed and shown to possess a common rhetorical structure that is independently constituted and that may determine what is being said. It is argued that this rhetoric of everyday talk signifies a set of social positions that are projected onto social reality without always representing it. It is suggested that in this rhetoric may lie the concrete impulse in the phenomenological world that has led anthropologists to talk of culture.

persistence, even when formal theory emphasized a search for something other than talk (for example, "evaluation" in the Parsonian sense, or "understanding," *verstehen*, in its Weberian or phenomenological transformations) is not to be ignored.

In recent years, "social" anthropologists who, from Morgan to Radcliffe-Brown at least, assumed a direct relationship between terminological systems and structures of society have come to recognize the power of language. In order to reach these structures of society they have attempted to escape the participants' interpretation of their society by investigating such things as the functional limits to band size (Chagnon 1968, 1976) or the nutritional value of the food distributed at ritual sacrifices (Rappaport 1968). Cultural anthropologists, on the other hand, continue to come back to words, modes of address and reference, ritual, and other data that can be apprehended in no other way than through words, particularly words-in-sequence, myths and texts of various sorts. Indeed, we might wonder whether there is anything else to culture than talk, more or less sophisticated or learned talk perhaps, but still talk. And yet many cultural anthropologists do not seem to draw the full consequences of the verbal nature of their raw data either in their methodological or theoretical discussions.

That culture should be mostly talk does not detract from the value of work in culture. For talk is a form of behavior. And if cultural anthropologists may be accused of idealism in the philosophical sense when they talk almost mystically of "core symbols," "national character," or "thick" descriptions, they are quite concrete, indeed almost behavioristic, when they confront squarely what must be taken as the source of their intuition: human beings do talk; talking is a constitutive element of human action. And this talk is more than random noisemaking.

All this is not quite new, although the consequences have not been fully drawn. Kroeber, close to seventy years ago, said that "terms of relationship . . . are determined primarily by language" (1909:84). Very recently, Geertz asked rhetorically, "what do we claim when we claim that we understand the semiotic means by which persons are defined to one another? That we know words or that we know minds?" (1976:235). But rather typically, both Kroeber and Geertz associate their recognition of the centrality of the linguistic experience with a search for what the words "reflect" (Kroeber) or what "motivates" (Geertz) them. For Kroeber, "terms of relationship reflect psychology." Sixty-seven years later there has been progress to the extent that Geertz does question what we get to know through cultural analyses. But he is unequivocal in his answer: we get to know something that he does not quite name but that has to do with "wholes," "sweeping characterization," "what the whole is about," to paraphrase an approving remark he makes about a literary critic's approach to the analysis of a poem—that is, we get to know something other than words.

In this attempt to go beyond words, many cultural anthropologists place themselves in relation to their data in much the same position the early social anthropologists did: they try to see in what they observed something else that is reflected in it. But is this such an easy exercise? We must remain skeptical until we fully understand how the reflecting surface operates. If it operates like a mirror, then there is little problem. If it operates like any sort of prism or lens, then the situation becomes more difficult.

Most work in the various social scientific disciplines suggests that the latter metaphor is a more adequate approximation of the situation. We must take the stance that what is reflected in speech has been distorted by that speech and that, until other evidence is available, an analysis of verbal data is essentially an analysis of speech and discourse. Indeed, I suspect that most of the great cultural analyses, from Ruth Benedict's on, have been analyses of words before they have been analyses of anything else. And these analyses are always more convincing when the verbal data are directly handled than when they are not. One has only to look at Geertz's famous essay on "Person, Time and Conduct

in Bali" (1973:360–421) to realize how much more powerful he is when he deals with the intricacies of Balinese technonymy than when he tries to characterize Balinese etiquette as "playful theatricality."

Other theoreticians were less shy in recognizing the centrality of language in the constitution of the human world: Cassirer (1935) in philosophy, for example, and Sapir (1949) and Whorf (1964) in linguistics and anthropology, and Benvéniste (1966). In recent years another approach has appeared. It is exemplified best by the new sociolinguistics, most prominently in the efforts of Hymes (1974) to goad anthropologists into explicating more exactly the relationship between the type of verbal interaction they entered into with their informants and the eventual ethnographical descriptions that they present as essentially free from linguistic determinants. When Hymes so prods ethnologists, he also suggests that many "social" analyses are in fact nothing more than unwitting linguistic analyses. The ultimate import of his remarks is that we must take seriously the power of language to make participants in any social situation—including the ethnographer in his field—accept that the categories suggested by the language used represent or refer to objective dimensions in society. In more abstract terms, I shall talk of the power of language to constitute or to signify an intelligible social world. Schneider (1972) has repeatedly talked in the same vein, particularly with reference to kinship theory and its history.

But Hymes does not seem fully aware that much work in sociolinguistics itself fails to confront squarely the signifying power of language. From Malinowski's theory of meaning, which is generally credited as the foundation of sociolinguistics (1965), to Labov's study (1972) of the social stratification of postvocalic (r) in New York City, or to most of the papers on oratory in traditional societies edited by Bloch (1975), the emphasis has been on the way social conditions and situational pressures that are constituted independently from language are reflected in language use and are indeed the primary determinant of what this language "means."

The analytical process involved in these studies can be well illustrated by looking at two exemplary sociolinguistic analyses of second person pronoun usage in the "Standard Indo-European" languages that prescribe the use of the plural form in certain social situations when speaker and addressee are in fact singular units. Paul Friedrich, in a justly famous paper on the Russian usage, says in his introductory paragraphs that *objective* distinctions in Russian life, either social or "cultural," *determine* pronominal usage, that is, whether a single person is to be addressed by the singular pronoun *ty* or by the plural *vy* (1972:276–277). And yet nowhere does he look at "objective" Russian life: he assumes it is directly reflected in the language. This posture is even more pronounced in the article by Brown and Gilman (1960) that Friedrich acknowledges as the inspiration for his work. I believe we cannot assume such a direct relationship between "objective" life and its representation in speech. Friedrich's analysis actually suggests that speakers, far from being constrained by social interaction from using certain pronouns, in fact *define* the situation by their use of the pronouns.² In other words, it is equally possible that speakers manipulate the *ty/vy* distinction to *hide* objective relationships as that their usage is determined by them.

The power of language to hide, to distort and, positively, to create social "reality" is what I think cultural anthropologists must face squarely in their attempt to ground concretely the intuition that continues to propel the search for "culture."³ This paper is an attempt to demonstrate the usefulness of such a statement. It will focus deliberately on the structuring of words in sequence, on rhetorical manipulation and everyday myth making. In the process I feel I shall begin to fulfill the program set by Schneider for cultural anthropology and to show that "ultimate values, collective representations, what

[Schneider] calls the system of symbol and meanings, permeate the total society and are not confined to religion, to ritual, to magic or myth alone.” (Schneider 1976:208).

Indeed, if the approach I am using here does prove to be fruitful, it might be possible to show, and this would remain within the spirit of Schneider’s program, that these systems of meanings are manifested most consistently and redundantly at the *lowest* level of daily interaction—as in unmarked speech where, in fact, none of the “ultimate” issues is addressed. It might even be seen *better* in the speech of everyday life than in the “highest” expression of thought, such as artistic, political, or religious speech. Indeed, Schneider may be misleading in building his statement the way he does, talking first of “ultimate values” and then of the total society. Perhaps we should say that it is the rhetoric that comes first, with the expression of “ultimate values” following as an epiphenomenon of a fundamental behavioral system that has in fact nothing to do with “values” per se.

Concretely, this paper looks at five examples of everyday talk in an American high school that I and two student assistants observed a few years ago.⁴ I shall focus in particular on the verbal handling of social differentiation and on the interpretation of social relationships in terms of what I shall call “rhetorical modes.”

I shall talk of “rhetoric” to emphasize that the function of the speech we shall examine is *persuasion* rather than truth. The important thing for speakers is that certain reactions be triggered, whatever the means employed, even if these verbal means can be shown to be inadequate representations of the object or activity being described when these objects are seen “intrinsically,” or at least “autonomously,” that is, outside of the discourse in which they were originally used.⁵

I shall also talk of “modes,” in the plural, to mark two things. First, the power of cultural interpretation to signify the world and to constitute contexts for action can be understood only if we approach it as internally differentiated. As structuralist theory in linguistics has always argued, meaning is dependent on the creation of discontinuities within a continuous field. My work implies that this is so for rhetoric, too. Second, the word “mode,” although it is a synonym for the “way” or “manner” in which something is done, is also used in music theory to refer to scale systems, that is, to ordered arrangements of notes. Similarly, a rhetorical mode is never a word, a name; it is a certain way of selecting and arranging words in discourse.

Through this dual process of differentiation and selection, the rhetorical modes I shall identify provide the basic parameters within which is set any discourse about the interaction of human beings in the school. And in this way they signify a set of culturally defined positions in which speaker and audience can be put, they objectify a kind of ethnosociology that can then become the subject of manipulation in speech.

The first text I shall analyze is a memo sent by the principal to the teachers a few weeks after he arrived in the school for the first time.

Text 1

Memo
June 25, 1971
To: FAC
From: Foster

There is something intriguing about a teacher surplus which now exists in our country today. It permits us to be very selective in education. It enables us to assign teachers better. It even lets us replace some teachers we should not have hired in the first place. Possibly, at long last, it can stimulate us to be serious about individualizing instruction.

I have listed below some of my thoughts which will obviously convey my ideas and philosophy of education.

1. Accountability: Teachers must become more and more accountable for student failures. Just as the patient expects the doctor to administer medication, teachers must continue to search for methods and approaches to meet the needs of students.

2. "E" and "F" grades: I must emphasize, even though the record shows the student has failed, it is a definite reflection on the teacher and his approach to helping the student learn.
3. Teachers must show an awareness of understanding of pupils' human as well as intellectual needs. The student must have a sense of personal worth, a feeling he belongs, and some sense of power to make a difference in shaping his own destiny. This would again infer that the failure of a student is because of the failure of a teacher.

This memo is obviously not a straightforward description of certain "facts." It is the product of complex operations. Let us look at two of the most striking features:

(1) Foster implies that he is speaking *with* his audience rather than *to* it ("our" country, "us," "we"). He does this redundantly in the introduction to the memo and shifts to "I" only in the second paragraph. In any other context this progression would have ensured the interpretation of this "I" as a polite reference to a *personal* opinion in the midst of an otherwise all but unanimous community ("our country").

(2) There are three major referents. That is, the principal ("we"/"I") is talking about three "things":

- (a) "teachers" and a "teacher surplus";
- (b) "some teachers";
- (c) "students."

The distribution of this memo took place before my team and I began our observations, so I do not have direct observations of the teachers' reaction. I have, however, an interpretive account of this reaction:

Text 2

Foster then began to talk about his first month at the high school. He said that upon arriving at the high school, he began to write a lot of memos. He said that these memos upset and frustrated people. He said that the most upsetting memo was a four-page memo he handed out the last day of school. He told me that he had met with the teachers in the commons and that after he finished speaking, almost every teacher in the school came up to him to ask him angry questions. He said that two teachers followed him up to his office and challenged him. He said they were extremely upset and angry and they were shaking their fists at him. He said that the teachers had had a pretty easy year that year, because they had gone through the school year doing basically what they pleased, because the former principal was winding down and didn't pay too much attention to them.⁶

The principal also said that he did not really expect the hostility against him would be as severe as it was, a sign perhaps of his naiveté and lack of experience. Of interest is the fact that he talks continually of "the teachers" generically (look especially at the last sentence), even though he acknowledges that some teachers were not hostile and indeed that *only* two teachers actually directly challenged him. (I know from other evidence that the principal in fact had very good friends on that faculty, that his implacable enemies were rather few, and that most teachers were essentially apathetic.) In other words, *his usage of "the teachers" is not descriptive or directly referential*.

In the third text (below), we have another example of a similar process of interpretation, this time as performed by a teacher in a report of an incident to one of the field workers in a confidential interview situation.

Text 3

Hope Staffer and I got into a discussion about discipline. Hope told me that teachers have problems with discipline because they're "not backed up by the administration." She related a story about an incident that had occurred last year. She said that a student had been standing outside of her art classroom which is near where the student lounge used to be. This student's girlfriend was in her class and he was hanging around the door disturbing some of the students. She asked him to leave and he said to her "screw you." Hope reported the incident to Mr. Ervin and Mr. Ervin spoke to the student. Hope told me that the student was let off without any punishment. Mr. Ervin explained to her that the student said that he apologized for saying it but that he was very tired and irritated because he had been up the night before watching a football game on television. It seems that this student is a jock, as Hope said. This infuriated Hope because she felt that she "deserved more respect as a teacher."

Like the principal in the second text, Hope Staffer generalizes a negative incident involving three individuals into an example of the fact that “teachers” are not “backed up by the administration.” It is important to note that her use of “the administration” and “the teachers” is as little referential in the strict sense as the principal’s use of “the teachers” was. It is not that *all* administrators *never* back teachers up. It is rather that she is now talking about something else, particularly her fear of being evaluated negatively for having difficulties disciplining her students.

I have chosen to start with these three texts because they all are explicitly about evaluation and conflict and thus can provide a bridge into the argument I want to make. They are, furthermore, similar and different in various ways. The first and second texts were uttered by the principal, whereas the third was produced by a teacher. The second and third texts were uttered in a private context, the first was a public document. Furthermore, in all three texts we can observe manipulations of individualization (“we,” “some teachers,” “Mr. Ervin”) and generalization (“the teachers,” “they,” “the administration”). We can also see that there seems to be a rough equivalency—easily a misleading one as I shall show later—between references to the social structurally based conflict between teachers and administrators and generalization. Foster does not say “some teachers had an easy year,” he says, “the teachers had.” Staffer does not say, “I am not supported by the assistant principal,” she says, “teachers are not backed up by the administration.”

Text 1 shows an even more complex manipulation. Foster is talking about evaluation, but his first markings of himself in relation to his audience are in terms of first person plural pronouns (“our,” “us,” “we”). He shifts into talking about “teachers” only after he has set a personalized stage. But as soon as he gets into the heart of a very dangerous matter he shifts out of personalization. He does not say “we must become more accountable,” nor does he say “you must become accountable.” He says “they must become accountable.”

It would thus seem easy to characterize what I shall call the “generic plural rhetorical mode” by the use that informants generally make of it. It is used:

- (1) for dealing with structurally dangerous subjects (text 1)
- (2) in reacting to hostility from persons in a different structural position (text 2);
- (3) in interpreting the personally disagreeable actions of a person or persons in different structural positions from one’s own (text 3).

It is important to notice, however, that a reference to “they” can as well be the result of a threat as it can be the making of a threatening statement. Furthermore, it is as much what *defines* a situation as threatening as it is a reaction to an actually threatening situation. Text 3 is a very good example of this. Hope Staffer could tell the same story in various ways. The immediate context does not change and yet, at different points within her one utterance, she either individualizes the incident (“a student did something to me and Ervin did something to that student”) or generalizes it (“they”). Neither the incident as such, nor the social relationship between teachers and administrators, nor even the actual situation (a confidential interview) in which the utterance was set are full determinants of what Staffer actually said. Her utterance was a quasi-literary creation that she built out of the tools given her; these were both the various contexts that I just mentioned and the rhetorical modes.⁷

In the analysis of the three texts, I have suggested that the participants could either individualize or generalize the human beings with whom they interacted. I stressed particularly the generalizing mode, which I referred to as the “generic plural mode.” The next text, another memo from the principal, is a manipulation of individualization and is a good illustration of a mode I shall refer to as the “personal” mode.

Text 4

Memo
To: Science Teachers

From: Foster
P.T.O. Discussion Group
1/1/73

Let me take this opportunity to thank each of you for the exceptional report and discussion presented to the small group of P.T.O. mothers at the Board of Education offices on Wednesday of this week. As principal of this high school it was a pleasure for me to hear each of you discuss with the parents the pros and cons of your subject matter. It is also interesting to see the positive reactions from those persons who have so many questions about the many innovations and changes which have been made by each of you.

I was sincerely interested in the reactions of the parents because in every case I felt that they were more than satisfied with the answers and the discussion. Each of you were most capable to defend and explain the reason for the approaches used in each of our science courses. The professionalism displayed was without a doubt quite impressive to each of the ladies in the audience. Keep up the good work and I certainly look forward to the many ideas and future changes which each of you are discussing and attempting to implement into your program.

The relevant features are:

- (1) the constant insistence on I;
- (2) the similar insistence on "each of you";
- (3) the absence of any reference to the audience of the memo in the generic plural mode (except in the dedication of the memo and then only as a diacritical mark);
- (4) the use of the generic plural mode in reference to "the parents," "the mothers";
- (5) the obvious upbeat quality of the memo;
- (6) Foster's reference to himself "as principal."

The mode of address is personal. It is not "the teachers" who are to be thanked. It is "each of you." The generic plural mode is used but only in reference to the "parents," a group who is not part of the audience of the memo and who, all participants know, can safely be put in the scapegoat position of troublemaker. Parents do evaluate, particularly those, very few in fact, who attend such school functions. They can put pressure on various people and through this activity they are objectively threatening. This means that the memo is also about evaluation as much as it is about the behavior of a few human beings. But once again, the principal is not held by that "objective" content. What he uses is the most common mode of verbal interaction in the school, the personal mode.

This mode is signaled by the use of singular personal pronouns ("I," "each of you") or first names ("John") and is characterized by the total absence of any linguistic marking of social characteristics that might be considered relevant. As Jakobson says of first names:

"Fido" means nothing more than a dog whose name is "Fido." The general meaning of such words as "pup," "mongrel," or "hound" could be indicated by abstractions like puppyhood, mongrelness, or houndness, but the general meaning of "Fido" cannot be qualified in this way. To paraphrase Bertrand Russell, there are many dogs called "Fido," but they do not share any property of "Fidoness." (Jakobson 1957:1)

Although first names and personal pronouns differ in that first names "can be defined without reference to a code," whereas personal pronouns, as shifters, "cannot be defined without a reference to the message" (Jakobson 1957:1-2), they perform the same function in American culture of indexing the uniqueness, separateness, and the logically prior character of the unlabelled person.

Sex is not marked in first and second person pronouns, nor is it in quite a few first names. More importantly perhaps, there is no routine, unmarked way of signaling the type of social differentiation I have been mentioning: when an evaluator and the person he evaluates meet, they address each other using unmarked "I" and "you," "John," and "Lloyd," and thus they hide the nature of their social relationship. Indeed, outsiders could not easily differentiate between administrators and teachers if they used modes of address as their sole data.

However, there were other signs that could be used to differentiate people. These signs constitute a third mode, which I shall refer to as the "generic singular" mode. It is essentially typical of administrative talk and the fifth text is a straightforward example of it.

*Personnel**Responsibilities and Duties**Teachers*

(Developed by a Committee of the Chatham Teachers Association in cooperation with Administrators of the School System)

The teacher is directly responsible to the Principal for the total performance of his/her services to the school. He/She is responsible to the Assistant Principal or other designated school personnel in areas for which they are charged with primary responsibility.

Major duties and responsibilities of the teacher are as follows:

1. Instruct, guide, and evaluate pupils. These are the teacher's primary responsibilities and all other duties which do not contribute to this end should be held to a minimum. Duties in this area include:
 - a) knowing the students as individuals and inspiring them to take full advantage of their educational opportunities.

This is extracted from the bylaws of the school, from which come most of the examples of the generic singular mode I collected. Of major interest is the fact that except for the salutation the major apparent referent of the policy is consistently dealt with as a singular: "the teacher is responsible." Furthermore, there is a strong marking of the fact that teachers can be either male or female. There are also long elaborations (the policy concerning "teachers" runs for three pages) of what teachers do and do not do. All of these things are precisely *not* marked in any of the other modes even though these other modes are much more commonly used.

Administrative talk was extremely rare. And although it is certainly a *verbal* mode, it is essentially not an oral mode. The oral mode for administrative talk was used only in situations where the audience could be assumed not to know the position of one of the persons being referred to in the organization of the school (as in interviews with the field workers or in talk among the adults about students). Even then it was used in passing in an exchange of the type "who is he?" "he is a student." After it had been established what John was, the dialogue could proceed in the personal mode. I shall refer to this usage as being essentially diacritical (John student).

Administrative talk is mainly a written mode. Functionally, it is also the *legal* mode par excellence. It is the mode of formal evaluation. It is in many ways the sacred mode that is not to be used in normal interaction but that is always present in the background of normal interaction. My informants often said that the bylaws were essentially an irrelevant document that nobody ever consulted. But they did exist and the same participants would not hesitate to use the bylaws to justify their acts in situations in which these were challenged, particularly when they were the most radically challenged, as in threats of dismissal.

And yet this mode is the least referential of the three I have mentioned. If we look back at text 5, it is evident that the author of the policy is not describing an actual event. Supposedly, he is describing a whole pattern of events. But in fact he is taking into account only a part of the total behavior of teachers and principals. He is creating a picture of their behavior toward each other and the students that is thoroughly mythical—even though it is eminently "real" to the participants, in certain contexts at least.

Let me now summarize what I have done up to this point. Taking a set of statements all of which are more or less directly relevant to the evaluation of teachers by administrators, I have shown that the one powerful social reality of the school environment could in fact be handled verbally in any of three rhetorical modes. Speakers could use, to refer to themselves or to others, either what I called:

- a personal mode (Mode 1)
- a generic plural mode (Mode 2)
- a generic singular mode (Mode 3)

In other words they could refer to themselves and to each other either as individual persons, as members of a generic group, or as holders of a special position or role in the organization of the school. And they could do this whatever the "real," let me rather call it the "social," context of their utterances.

To make this point I have chosen deliberately some of the most difficult texts among those I collected. These texts are difficult to analyze precisely because they are about evaluation rather than, say, about the latest sports events. We can perceive in these texts the social tensions directly and thus run the risk of being so influenced by these obvious tensions that we undertake a solely sociological analysis. I hope I have shown that such an analysis would not be enough by itself. It is a fact that when a speaker talked of "they," in whatever contexts, he was probably always referring, more or less wittingly, to some sort of conflict. But he did not necessarily refer to the groups with whom he appeared to be in basic social conflict (the administrators for the teachers, and vice versa). A teacher may also be talking about other groups that he would constitute on an ad hoc basis, for example, "those who are in favor of individualized instruction," "the sports fiends," "the teachers who gossip in the teachers' lounge," and so forth. In other words, "they" can easily crosscut socially defined categories. Similarly "we" does not necessarily mean "we, the members of our social category." In fact it rarely meant this. For "we" really meant "my friends and I," and informants generally made a point of saying that they had friends among all the groups that constituted the school's social structure. "We," like "they," must be seen as referring to an ad hoc assemblage of people rather than to a predefined group.

It is this last characteristic that is of central importance. There certainly is value in an analysis that would emphasize that the school is infrastructurally divided by the organization of educational labor. From this point of view, it is probable that the division evaluator/evaluated would be considered to be the more powerful one in terms of which all others must be understood. To the extent that material survival in a monetary economy such as that of the United States is dependent on a salary and to the extent that such a salary is dependent on the continued good will of the persons who evaluate one, it is in one's interest to resist evaluation. And it is in the interest of the evaluators to find all possible occasions to evaluate or to mention evaluation, particularly because they themselves are often evaluated by an upper administration partially in terms of how well they evaluate the people for whom they are responsible. The teachers, the principal, and the superintendent are related to each other in this manner. Teachers, for their part, evaluate their students and are locked with them in the same sort of battle administrators have with the teachers. The teachers, too, are evaluated in terms of the effects of their interventions on their students' behavior.

This organization of educational production with the ensuing conflicts among participants that it generates is highly explanatory of many of the actions and utterances that one can observe or record in the school. In fact many of the ad hoc divisions that apparently crosscut the groups based on the organization of evaluation can always be understood, from the point of view of the teachers, as attempts to ingratiate themselves with the powers that be, or, from the point of view of the principal, as attempts to divide in order better to conquer. In other words, these groupings can be seen as reinforcing the infrastructure by hiding its true organization.

This is precisely the point. For there is no way for the participants to mark routinely in their speech whether they are referring to what an outsider might see as an infrastructurally constituted group or to what the same outsider might consider a mirage generated by forms of false consciousness. And although analysts might still wish to see in the former groups the basic referent of any "they," I propose that to do so is to lose sight of the cultural constitution of any "false" consciousness,⁸ particularly the false consciousness of social scien-

tists who have to talk, as I myself had to, in some manner about “they,” whatever the constitution of the group so referred to might be.

To explain every use of the modes in infrastructural terms would also be to lose sight of the actual complexity of the operations performed by the participants. We saw how, in one context (for example, a private confidential interview, as in text 3), a speaker can shift rhetorical modes to mark various things. How conscious participants are of their rhetorical operations is the issue. In text 3, Hope Staffer probably did want to talk to us about evaluation. Conversely, even though text 1 was obviously about evaluation, it is possible that the principal was not fully aware of the implications of what he was doing. It is certainly easy to argue that he did not address the teachers as “you” but rather as “we” because of a feeling that the content of the memo was so threatening in itself that, to the extent he felt he had to send it, he also had to write it in the personal mode. I doubt very much that he was so calculating. He told me that he did not think it was a threatening memo, which is as much proof of ineptness as it is proof of class conflict. The teachers, for their part, were obviously not obliged to take the “we” at face value. Many of them did not. But some *did* agree with the principal.

The movement from structure to sentiment, whether “infra-” structure or rhetorical structure, is thus a delicate one: individual motivation (“why” somebody said something to that person at that moment) is determined by, at least, *both* the social situation in which that person finds himself and the rhetorical means at his disposal to signify this position. These two structures most probably do not in fact come close to exhausting the various determinants of this motivation. In general, it is safer to assume that speakers are confused than it is to assume that there is a simple “why” to their utterances. Some speakers may miscalculate, whereas others, particularly when they are aware of the subtlety of the system, may be playing it in unpredictable ways. The audience similarly is in a partially indeterminate situation. It is not quite so indeterminate as the speaker’s because the audience must consider not only the speaker’s position and its own, in relation to itself as well as to the event being talked about, but also the mode the speaker is using. In other words, the audience has one more piece of data to consider in its decoding process than the speaker had when he coded. When the audience responds the process is reversed.

In this process, both speakers and audiences are conditioned by their situation to talk about certain things and to get into predefined conflicts. They are *also* conditioned by the rhetorical tools at their disposal to talk about these things in a certain way. In order to understand fully the pragmatics of their use, one must possess a clear picture of the structure of these rhetorical tools. That is what I shall attempt to provide now.

I have identified three modes. A full rhetorical analysis, something that I am preparing in a full-length monograph, will probably lead me to differentiate the personal mode into a singular (“I,” “you”) and a plural form (“we”). To explain why here would demand much more space than I have at my disposal. In any event, I am convinced that these four modes exhaust the possibilities. As far as I can see, there are no other ways for participants to refer to each other.⁹

Let me now review the three modes I have identified here. As I mentioned, the modes are realized in speech in various ways:

(1) The personal mode can be expressed by the use of first and second person personal pronouns (“I,” “you”) or first names (“John”). It can also be expressed in the use of third person pronouns both singular and plural when it is made clear through other means that the speaker is not talking about a category but about people as persons (“John and Peter, they”).

(2) The generic plural mode is expressed by the use of a nominal phrase built on an activity of some sort performed by human beings and then pluralized so that it is made to

refer—within the discourse—to all those who perform the activity (“the teachers,” “the sports fiends”) or it is expressed by the use of the third person plural pronoun “they” when the signified referent is clear to the audience.

(3) The generic singular mode is signaled by the use of words referring to a position in the organization of the school (“a teacher,” “a cafeteria worker”). These words are normally used in the singular.

What happens in speech is that the use of any of these modes shifts the referent of the utterance to any one of a set of predefined positions into which human subjects can be put for purposes of talking about them. As far as the rhetoric is concerned, there are three positions in the “social structure” of the school: undifferentiated individuals (in the personal mode no quality of the speaker or audience is marked, except the sexual identification that is implicit in most first names); informally defined differentiating personal categories (in the generic plural mode the subject [for example, “the teachers”] always refers to real persons—although these could not be named without a shift to the personal mode); or formally defined differentiating impersonal categories (the generic singular mode is “impersonal” in that speakers can talk, for example, of the duties of a “teacher” without referring to anything else than the definition).

At the core of my argument is the fact that *none of the positions signified by the rhetoric refers to an objective content*. This is most obvious with the personal mode, particularly in its pronominal realization (“I,” “we”) position; as Benvéniste has written: “it is a fundamental fact . . . that ‘pronominal’ forms do not refer to ‘reality’ nor to any ‘objective’ positions in time and space. What they refer to is the speech event, each time unique, which contains them” (Benvéniste 1966:254 my translation).

Neither Benvéniste nor Jakobson (1957) seem to have realized fully, however, that in certain contexts superficially nominal forms can behave like first and second person pronouns most obviously do.¹⁰ For example, a phrase like “the teachers,” when it is a realization of Mode 2, must not be construed as referring to an “objective” group that exists outside of any discourse. Similarly, in Mode 3, “the teacher” cannot be understood in terms of pure reference outside of a discourse. Obviously, I am not talking here about surface form. The third person plural forms when they function as realizations of Mode 2 (or third person singular forms when they function as realizations of Mode 3) are exceptional from the point of view of the much more common usage in which “they” simply refers to a set of objects directly specified earlier in the discourse (as in “John and Paul, they”).

But these same forms can be expressive of much more than simple reference. Let us look first at Mode 3. It might be possible to argue that even though “the teacher” does not refer to a concrete object, it does refer to a set of qualifiers that exist outside of the discourse in which they are used. Such an interpretation would not be incorrect. But we must also look at these qualifiers as they actually function in a discourse. As I mentioned earlier, a reference to “a teacher” in the singular, accompanied by a set of formal qualifications, marks the discourse as a special type of discourse that is distinguished from other types of discourses; the “differential information” is, following Jakobson (1960:354), rhetorical. This rhetorical information is carried by the discourse rather than by the content of the words uttered. In consequence, the rhetorical information cannot be handled as being simply referential. For what is referred to is not an object in the social world, whether a person, a group, or a set of qualifiers. What is referred to is a general view of humanity that dichotomizes between the person (Mode 1, the personal mode, “I”) and what this person does. However, what this person does is defined outside of any person. Mode 3 qualifications are designed to apply to persons, but they are not personal per se. We might talk of them as the “it” of a person, not a third person, but a first person, an active “I.”

Pronominal and nonpronominal realizations of Mode 2, the generic plural mode, must

also be dealt with as not directly referential. As we saw, when Hope Staffer said "the administration does not support the teachers," she was stating a different proposition from the one that is contained in a statement like "Lloyd does not like me." Lloyd is an actual person. The realizations of the generic plural mode, although they are always personal in form, do not in fact refer to any person in particular, or else they are made to refer to everybody ("Teachers are like children!" the principal would say in an exasperated mood. He would not say "some teachers are." He is even less likely to say "John [teacher] is a child."). "They" always remains an "empty" signifier, that is, one that has no "signified" in the material world.

"They" refers not to any object defined earlier in the discourse nor does "the teachers" refer to any group of persons present in the context, but rather both refer to what is *not* we. To this extent it shares in the objective emptiness of "we." "They," in these utterances, refers to itself. Its reality is what Benvéniste calls a "reality of discourse." It signifies "the persons who are spoken about in the present speech event that contains 'they'." This must be stressed to dispel the common anthropological illusion that a we/they distinction necessarily refers to the objective existence of two social groups wherein "we" necessarily reflects the social group with which a speaker identifies and "they," the people with whom he does not outside of any discourse. In the school the objective social content of either "we" or "they" constantly changed from utterance to utterance. As we saw, not only were the teachers' "we" by opposition to the administrators' "they," but "we" could also be some administrators and teachers versus other administrators and teachers, or even some administrators, teachers, and students versus others. Furthermore, the "we/they" identification of any speakers in relation to the same audience could change depending on the context of the utterance.

In other words, "the teachers" are not real people of flesh and blood, *except in a certain discourse*. In this discourse, the speaker might sometimes be able to point to those teachers who are "the teachers" at that moment. However, we cannot know a priori who these are in the same way that we cannot know who "I" or "we" refer to until they are used. To interpret a reference to "the teachers" in the school's language to be the reflection of a perception of an intrinsic sociological category is to fall victim to a double illusion.

First, there is the danger of accepting uncritically the participants' perception that "the teachers" is a real group. In situations like these we must always inquire about the source of this perception of reality. If it is rhetorical and cultural, we must deal with it as such.

Second, there is the "sociological" illusion, the tendency to project an analysis grounded in theoretical sociological considerations onto participants' analyses as the "basis" for these latter analyses. I explained earlier how a purely infrastructural analysis of rhetorical usage would be insufficient. Such an analysis would contribute to preventing us from recognizing that the participants, although they can assume a reference to "they" to be a reference to some kind of interactional danger, often do not know, or care to know, exactly who is involved. They can disagree on this point. They can refuse to enter into this type of discourse.

In other words, participants are always in an indeterminate position and the referent of their speech is unstable. Indeed, to speak of "reference" when talking about these things is inappropriate and possibly confusing. Such talk tends to move us away from language itself and into either "objective" analysis that makes us lose sight of the actual position of human beings in interaction or unwarranted abstractions, as, for example, when we talk of cultural behavior as "expressing" basic ideas of the culture, core symbols, or "what it's all about."

Rhetorical modes do not refer or reflect, they signify and constitute, that is, they objectify, make real through symbolic means, an ethnosociology that is thoroughly

realistic—even though it may not be “real.” This signifying power is great. To the extent that the modes cover all possible ways participants have of talking to or about each other, it is evident that they cannot in any simple way perceive or express the objective social relations that may underlie their interaction. Second, the rhetoric is constantly at work: it is impossible for participants to store in their memory and then retrieve information—always a verbal process—without doing so in rhetorical terms.

In summary, this signified ethnosociology builds an image of society in which three positions are marked contrastingly:

- (1) a community of individuals (through Mode 1);
- (2) individuals outside this community who form a purported other community (through Mode 2);
- (3) an enumeration of objective and impersonal qualities around which the communities can be built (through Mode 3).

In fact, as I suggested earlier and want to make explicit now, to talk of “positions” is not to be fully accurate, for what we are confronted with is a system of signifying distinctions. We should not talk of “I-wes,” “theys,” or “its,” but rather of a double opposition *I-we:it* and *I-wel:it:they*.

In more processual terms, we might describe the model postulated by this ethnosociology as one in which the relation linking human beings is organized in terms of ad hoc communities (“we” and “they”) constructed around a topic of interest at the moment, a topic that is defined on the basis of some partial activity of the participants (what I have called the “it” of a person). These ad hoc communities are created through a process of substraction among all the “Is” with which the speaker enters into contact or about which he knows. This subgroups is then coopted for the duration of the utterance.

conclusion

It would not be too difficult to relate the model I have just constructed to recent analyses of American culture, for example, Schneider’s (1968), and my own (Varenne 1977). When Schneider talks about “distinctive features,” “substance,” and “role,” he is probably referring to the type of formal and quasi-sacred discourse that I have identified here as Mode 3; this mode denotes that persons have various attributes relevant in different contexts, although always only to a small part of their total reality as persons. Schneider’s argument that in American kinship “the relative is a person” and “thus”—according to operations in American concrete logic—may or may not include in his kin universe people who would appear to be obviously related in substantive terms is probably grounded in the same type of social indeterminacy that forms the basis of my analysis of the “we” and “they” modes. It is the same form of indeterminacy, even though I did not see it quite so clearly then, that led me, in my study of American culture in a Midwestern town, to speak of “communities” created by the active will of individuals moved by a personal sentiment (“love,” “shared values,” or “respect for the other person’s differences”—to quote some of the verbal realizations natives use to refer to this sentiment).

My intent, however, is not to pursue these correspondences here. It is rather to restate the general theme with which I started. Neither I, nor Schneider in the works I have just mentioned, is able to explicate fully and precisely where our insights come from. Neither can Geertz explicate “playful theatricality,” nor could Benedict tell us how she decided

the Zuñi were “Apollonian.” At most we can say that our informants “told us,” or that the phrases we use are suggestive of how it felt to be among the Balinese or the Zuñi. How did our informants tell us? What is it exactly in the context provided us by our informants that triggered a particular emotion in the observer and what is it that was made to resonate in him?

These are perennial questions to which rather appropriate answers, fully consonant with the approach I am presenting have been offered. Bateson and Mead published in 1942 a study of Balinese character that should have become exemplary and yet has remained on the fringe of anthropological consciousness. In it they did try to answer the criticisms that had already been leveled against cultural approaches and attempted to specify behavioristically through a large set of photographs what were the exact sources of their phenomenological intuitions.¹¹ Many analyses in *Naven* (Bateson 1958) are self-consciously built on variations in verbal behavior. The work of Calame-Griaule (1965) on Dogon theories of speech is exemplary, too. However, such clear confrontations of the inherent difficulties facing cultural analyses are rare. It remains as incumbent upon cultural anthropologists to spell out their discovery procedures and explicate how they move from their concrete experiences in the field to their eventual analysis. The distaste many anthropologists exhibit toward cultural accounts of human behavior cannot be shrugged off, nor can we accept this scepticism to the point of denying the value of the approach or the reality of the intuition that there is something there. It is particularly important that cultural anthropologists explicate their analyses when they work with contemporary cultures in which the natives, if only in the form of not always sympathetic colleagues, do read the works produced and in which broad characterizations of the culture have already been made by scholars in other disciplines.

This exercise is, in fact, of more than methodological value. For if we can discover culture at work in the most routine of encounters, and if we can document how it operates, we will be more secure in our position that, to quote Schneider again, culture “permeates the total society and is not confined to religion, to ritual, to magic or myth alone” (Schneider 1976).

notes

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Conference on Culture and Communication held at Temple University, March 9–12, 1977. I would like to thank the many persons who have contributed to the paper, in particular Clifford Hill, Marj Kelly, Hope Leichter, David Moore, Gerry Murray, and my wife, Susan. I would also like to recognize the persons and institutions that have helped me collect the data on which my analysis is based: Patricia Caesar, Francis Ianni, Rodney Riffle, the Ford Foundation, the National Institute of Education, and the Horace Mann-Lincoln Institute at Teachers College.

² The most striking case is his analysis of the passage in Gogol’s *Dead Souls* (Friedrich, 1972:288–289) in which two interlocutors, in a long dialogue, many times change the pronouns they use to address each other to make shifts in their relationship.

³ Labov, in his most recent work (Labov and Fanschel 1977), has in fact been moving in this direction when he emphasizes that verbalization is essentially indeterminate in relation to psychological motivation. He does not stress quite as strongly the creative aspect of speech, but I suspect this is partially an artifact of his interest in the conversation of a psychoanalyst with his patient, in which the goal is to uncover, if not the “reality” of the unconscious, at least the powerful “thing,” whatever it may be, an operation on which will trigger the desired change. This is in fact the same sort of activity in which “social” scientists have most often been engaged, the reality-discovering-behind-the-myth activities that easily blind the investigator to the active structuring power of the myth.

⁴ This high school is located in an upper middle-class suburb of the northeastern megapolis. It is rather small (about nine hundred participants) with a very homogeneous student population, a supportive community, and no serious problems. Most of the teachers agreed that it was a very desirable

place to teach. My team spent an academic year there (1972–1973). The methodology was essentially participant-observation supplemented with taped interviews with all the administrators, many teachers, and some students. I have reported on this research in three papers (Varenne 1974, 1976; Varenne and Kelly 1976).

⁵ This is essentially Burke's analysis of the characteristics and function of rhetoric in his *A Rhetoric of Motives* (1969:27).

⁶ I regret not being able to work on the *verbatim* statement. I feel, however, that this third person account by a fieldworker is adequate for my present purposes. I do have many *verbatim* statements that follow the same pattern. Furthermore, a reader might be interested in looking at the fieldworker's reporting style in terms of the analysis I am proposing here. It seems to me that similar modes were used in the reporting as are used by informants in *verbatim* statements (as in the memos). If this is so, it would open the way for an examination of American sociological writing as a form of cultural behavior.

⁷ I would like to emphasize that Staffer is not doing anything too different from what Gogol was doing in *Dead Souls* (Friedrich 1972:288–289, see note 2). And, indeed, we must look at all verbalizations as more or less adept literary creations.

⁸ Note 3 is relevant here also. However "false" consciousness may be, it is still active as such and it must be understood in itself independently of the process through which it hides this reality.

⁹ It is possible that my analysis is faulty. However, any demonstration that other positions must be postulated in order to understand actual occurrences, although it would lead to a picture of a different structure, would still attribute similar properties to this structure. This is because these properties are predicated on the very mode of analysis I suggest and therefore would be acceptable to me in that they show that this mode of analysis is helpful in the overall task of understanding human behavior.

¹⁰ The error seems to have been a single-minded focus on morphological and grammatical categories (such as "pronouns" versus "nouns") when what was needed was attention to the function of certain verbalizations in speech. It is interesting that Hymes, who in recent years has made a point of constantly restating this very point, still has criticized Friedrich for talking about *ten* components of Russian pronominal usage. This, according to Hymes, "goes against the obvious fact that the Russians pronouns do essentially contrast in just the dimensions of authority and intimacy" (Hymes 1974:112). In other words, he is saying that there are but two pronouns, not ten. However, if we look at the other components Friedrich talks about not as belonging to a generalized "social context," as he himself puts it (Friedrich 1972:276), but rather as belonging to cultural categories signifying society for Russian actors, it could then be argued that we have indeed *ten* symbolic configurations of markers taken from the various communicative channels available to human beings; grammatical categories are but one component of this configuration (other components could be things like intonation, dress, or locale—each of these things is not part of the "context" of the utterance, but is as much part of the utterance itself as voicing or point of articulation is in the differentiation of *ty* from *vy*). All of this directly applies to the rhetorical modes about which I have been talking.

¹¹ See in particular the first page of their introduction (Bateson and Mead 1942:xi), where they confront the most glaring limitations of traditional cultural analyses, those that have to do with their dependency on "idiosyncratic factors and literary skills." But they do not consider this a radical limitation invalidating the whole theoretical approach. They still believe it should be possible to make statements that can be evaluated in the desired terms, and then they offer one possible solution: photographic illustrations.

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