

## Review of the Behaviour Essay

I included the 'behaviour essay' in this collection of semasiology's roots because it is a prime example of the care Ardener consistently exercised with regard to any aspect of language-use. Over the years, however, I've heard people dismiss the essay in two words: "Just semantics," they say.

But I could never figure out what the 'just' in 'just semantics' meant. When I've been bold enough to ask, "What do you mean by 'just semantics'?" (hoping they would catch the double *entendre*: i.e. "What do you mean by 'just meaning'?") I was often confronted with the reply: "Oh come off it: you *know* what I mean." Stupid though I appeared to be, I had to say that I *didn't know* what they meant -- then or now -- for it isn't a simple matter of the single word that is at stake, is it? If all that's at stake is the kind of quarrel that can be solved by consulting a dictionary, then the phrase "just semantics" is justifiable, but talk at that level is a kid's game. Ardener wasn't indulging in kid's games when he wrote the 'Behaviour' essay:

1. To ask a social anthropologist to treat 'behaviour' as a universal and to relate it to his own subject, is inevitably to miss the point of all recent advances in the subject (p. 140, this volume), and

2. It is always the major task in social anthropology to find the actors' classification. This is not quite the same as asking him *why* he is acting (same page, this volume).

Between those two citations, we discover that (a) our ordinary usages of the word, 'behavior' don't translate well into other languages, (b) the wide-spread American use of 'behavioral' (as in "the behavioral sciences" or "the behavioral aspects of X") is a constant source of perplexity,<sup>12</sup> and (c) we often mis-translate phrases from other societies (such as *omne nala* in Ibo) because we have identified something from our own culture that we imagine we see in 'their' culture. Are these items usefully dismissable as "just" semantics? And, what about the end results of studies to which Ardener draws attention in the yam-hole example? Because of the unresolved problems with what he or she means by 'behavior', investigators are "tempted to subdivide the action sequence into symbolic and instrumental sections" (p. 140, this volume).

From my own experience in West Africa, I observed that a symbolic/instrumental opposition is likely to be inevitable in cases where farmers not only put herbs and ash (of whatever kind) into yam-holes, they often pour libations and say prayers as well! Even if the herbs and ash are accepted as "instrumental" by a scientifically-orientated investigator, the libation-pouring and the prayers will usually be classified as "symbolic." To make this kind of shift "distorts the significance of the different parts of the sequence according to criteria which are irrelevant to the actor" (p. 140, this volume).

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<sup>12</sup> Because we rarely find out what the user of the phrases *means*. That is, are they talking about rule-governed social behavior or some quantifiable universal that has nothing to do with human rule-following?

So, how do we deal with the *nature* of oppositions<sup>13</sup> -- not just the opposition 'symbolic/instrumental' but these: 'odd/even', 'on/off', 'tall/short', moving/stationary, 'straight/crooked', 'healthy/diseased'? True binary oppositions *exclude* intermediaries, thus cardinal numbers are *either* odd or they are even; light switches and telephone bells are *either* on or off.<sup>14</sup> The one category is mutually exclusive of the other. To digress momentarily: it is just here that my objection to Holdcroft's 'Fundamental Dichotomies' emerges (p. 137, note 22 this volume). A 'dichotomy' consists of the division of things into two basic parts *regarded as fundamentally or irreducibly different*. A dichotomy refers to a mutually *exclusive* relationship of two things. The Saussurean oppositions of *langue/parole*, signifier/signified, for example, are misconceived if they are understood in this way.<sup>15</sup>

On the other hand, *contrary oppositions* do not display categorical exclusiveness. That is, relative to Y, X may be tall, but relative to Z, X may be short. Oppositions such as 'tall/short', 'moving/stationary', 'straight/crooked', 'healthy/diseased' are examples of such contraries. Another type of contrary opposition is that which admits of intermediaries -- the 'continuum class' of contraries such as 'black/white', the notes middle C and E on a piano and 'fast/slow'. The distinction we make nowadays between 'digital' and 'analog' marks the difference between binary oppositions (digital) and contrary oppositions (analog).

The sun and moon *are not contraries of this kind*, but are called opposite or contrary in virtue of their association with night and day or other seasonal, cyclic changes. In fact, like so many observable *natural oppositions*, i.e. 'growth/decay', 'land/water', 'solid/liquid', 'young/old', these pairs are distinguished by belonging to nature. *They do not admit human mediators*. This is what makes them different from the kind of opposition with which Lévi-Strauss was preoccupied: raw/cooked. Because food represents a significant part of the base-line definition of most human societies, it became important to know just what the socio-cultural transformation between, say, a raw potato and a cooked potato means with regard to humankind. Thus, there are transformations that represent, not 'natural' but human, socio-cultural transformations. For example, stone in a stream bed or quarry and the same stone found in a circle, or in some way carved, painted or etched, has undergone a fundamental socio-cultural (by definition human) transformation.<sup>16</sup>

There is still another type of opposition: logical complementaries, such as 'positive/negative', 'male/female', 'inside/outside', 'ABCD/BDCA'. Transform-

<sup>13</sup> The intellectual debt I owe to Lévi-Straussian anthropology is connected with the general idea of oppositions.

<sup>14</sup> If the light switch has a 'dimmer' (as in a theater), then it ceases being a binary.

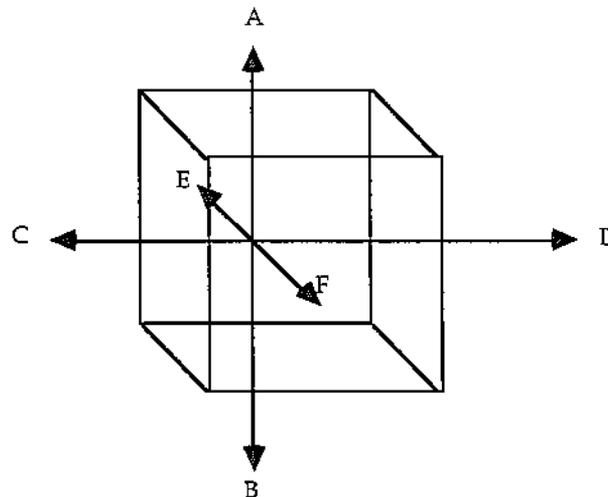
<sup>15</sup> Suffice to say here that 'signifier/signified' was to Saussure *an irreducible whole* which he labelled 'linguistic sign' which was meant to include both 'concept' and 'sound image'.

<sup>16</sup> As semasiologists would put the matter, there are *intransitive structures* pertaining to human-actions (the oppositions defining the earth's gravitational field are good examples: up/down, right/left, and front/back) and there are *transitive structures* (any move or set of moves on any of these axes created by people).

ations such as these are inherently different from the changes of state which we might observe between a seedling and the same plant in a state of decay. True logical complementaries have been used to distinguish spiritual or social categories from material ones, geographical from religious categories. Often, any one of these oppositions may have different meanings on different levels, for example, right/left in purely visual terms expresses bi-lateral *symmetry* of the human body, but on a social level, right/left expresses distinct, value-laden *assymmetry*. Students would do well to study Hertz's work on the right hand (Needham 1960). Ogden's work with reference to opposition is also instructive:

Geometrical and spatial metaphors are particularly worthy of study, since the opposite sides of a rectangle give us what amounts to a peculiar kind of opposition, such as we find also in the opposite sides of a street (which may be said to 'face' one another) and the opposite sides of a building (which, Janus-wise, face in opposite directions ... In most of the spatial metaphors, however, a third and even more fundamental feature of opposition can be detected, namely, direction (1967[1932]: 60).

Up/down, backwards and forwards, 'into and out of' connoted the feature of reversability to Ogden. To me, up/down, front/back and right/left became the *intransitive structures* (invariant components) of the human *canonical coordinate space*.



The human canonical coordinate space diagrammed, where  
A/B = up/down; C/D = right/left and E/F = front/back.

No other spatial dimensions exist on planet earth with regard to the pull of gravity and the earth's atmosphere. No dance, sign language, martial art -- in fact, *no human movement takes place outside these dimensions*.

One can imagine worlds where there are no invariant parameters; worlds where, for instance, one would never know which direction dropped objects would fall or where the degrees of freedom available at the jointing parts of

the body changed randomly, but these conditions do not obtain at present on this planet,<sup>17</sup> thus we may safely assume that

There are invariant features of the semasiological body and its spatio-linguistic environment that provide strong lines of continuity upon which culture-specific semanticities depend.

Having said that to Ardener in June, 1971, he said, "Good. Now prove it."

My task was to find a way of defining the space/time environment in which dancers (and everyone else) moved. Once I'd done that, I had to define the human body's *capacity* to move.<sup>18</sup> Then, I had to state what "a unit of movement" amounted to. Since I already knew from conversations and tutorials that "Social anthropologists have long been forced to realise that there is no universal unit of 'action' in society" (p. 141, this volume), I tackled the canonical coordinate space first.

### Set Theory and Semasiology

I used set theory in semasiology because sets provide a simple, precise means for defining certain classes of objects such as types of numbers, classes of human actions, etc.<sup>19</sup> Sets are convenient devices that sort out information illustrating the relations that exist between groups of objects, things, names, symbols or whatever. Set theory is important in modern mathematics because the basic laws of arithmetic, algebra and geometry can be derived from the axioms of set theory.<sup>20</sup> The best example of the convenience of using sets in ethnographic description is to be found in the description of 'spaces' in the Tridentine Mass (Williams 1994: 39).

I had to identify the space *internal* to the Mass to contrast it with the geographical space in which all Masses exist because the liturgical space of the rite doesn't derive its semantic characteristics from geographical space. Geographical space is a metric space which is defined by virtue of distance, lines of latitude and longitude and the magnetic poles of the earth. In fact, we can say that geographical space itself constitutes a 'set', G, which is composed of directional elements, i.e. 'north' [N], 'south' [S], 'east' [E] and 'west' [W].

Instead of having to say all of that every time I want to talk about geographical space, I can simply write (or say):  $G = [N,S,E,W]$ . In mathematics, the word, 'set' means "a collection (or grouping) of objects." These objects can be names, numbers, symbols, species -- in fact 'objects' of any kind, countable

<sup>17</sup> Astronauts in outer space have a changed relationship to the coordinate 'up/down', of course, but it was not my purpose to include those conditions in this research.

<sup>18</sup> Owing to spatial limitations, the analysis of degrees of freedom of the semasiological body and the law of hierarchical motility are not included here.

<sup>19</sup> In this context, there is no difference in meaning between the statements "a set of objects" and "a class of objects."

<sup>20</sup> This fact was demonstrated by Bertrand Russell and Alfred North Whitehead in their work, *Principia Mathematica* (1910).