

Afterword: At the center of the human condition

JAMES W. FERNANDEZ

Why semiotics?

Let us face one infectious issue immediately lest our reading of these instructive and often richly textured papers be impaired by those oh-so-primordial human preoccupations with belonging, with allegiance, with membership. The question arises as to what we are to call — how we are to label — the very diverse but fruitful exercises in understanding that are here brought together under Michael Herzfeld's benevolent stimulus. Why semiotics? One raises the question not so much for those whose work is here collected — we have all agreed to appear under the rubric, semiotic anthropology or semiotic ethnography — but to those who will consult this volume but who — travelling under a different banner or perhaps none at all — will be irritated or offended by the term semiotic. I understand that the term semiotic often provokes such reaction, although it is a term of august ancestry in American pragmatism and European linguistic thought.

The test of any form of analysis, any framework of interpretation, any code for reading, is whether it renders more intelligible the human situation. The human situation, as we are all aware, is characterized to a lamentable extent by — not to mention calculated and cold-spirited evil — lying, deceit, oppression, mystification, smugness, intolerance, and other forms of self-serving activity and wilful ignorance too numerous to be listed. It is our task to illuminate and inform these dark areas of human thinking and comportment.

To say this is not necessarily to return simply to the moral philosophy of the last century that was antecedent to the behavioral science we know today ... if only because we are now securely observational in method and as intrigued by the scientists' sense of the puzzle to be teased apart as we are animated by the injustices in the human condition to be illuminated and corrected. Nevertheless, the bottom line is whether our work contributes, through its intelligibility, to the amelioration of the human condition as we understand it or whether it does not.

If semiotics promises intelligibility it does so for at least two reasons. First, signs are always put forth within a certain context and from a certain point of view. An awareness of that — an awareness very semiotic in nature — is the ground from which the intelligible must proceed. Second, intelligibility always involves the clarification of the relationship between — the negotiation between — the self and the other. This relationship is central, as these papers make clear, to semiotic thought.

Reminding ourselves of the situatedness and the negotiation that is, in the end, implicit in all study of behavior — insofar as it is not simply a strategic service contracted out to established powers — is, however, itself too easy. For the process of rendering intelligible is confronted with many paradoxes and complexities. Here also, however, semiotics is forthcoming and undaunted. For not only does it, in its attention to the vicissitudes of the sign, track as closely as possible the negotiation between the self and the other, it also accepts as central — axiomatic — the paradoxes of the human condition.

A certain shiftiness — the paradoxes of the human condition

Where do these paradoxes, these ambiguities, lie? Irene Portis Winner argues in her paper that they lie in the self-referential or reflexive quality of signs — that is, in our dual human capacity to shift back and forth between the 'I' and the 'you', to be aware of the self as self and also as a possible other. This engenders, Winner argues as have others, the human penchant for paradox, surprise, contradiction. It gives to the human situation a certain quality of 'shiftiness', if one wills (Fernandez 1975). And while one may regret that fact, it is the virtue of semiotics to look directly at it. This unflinching scrutiny of the ironic paradoxes at the center of the human situation is what characterizes a number of essays in this volume — and is, in good part, what gives them their power. In particular Drummond's powerful account of the shifting of interrelated perspectives that have been taken toward the Jonestown massacre is an account that refuses to commit itself to any final bounded, settled, authoritative reading of that event. Drummond's skepticism — not to say ironic view — of authoritative explanations or interpretations and his insistence that ethnographic discourse must give as clear as possible an account of the overlapping and mutually inconsistent points of view that characterize the phenomenon dwells, it seems to me, at the very heart of that shiftiness. So, also, does Michael Herzfeld in his honest reflections upon the bitter vicissitudes of his early fieldwork in Greece. For at the center of that experience lay all the ambiguities of the Greek villagers'

relationships to themselves and to outsiders, which the local code of etiquette masked but which were ever-present, persistent, and ready to assert themselves in unexpected ways. In particular, in respect to the insider–outsider category, Herzfeld found himself a shape-shifter — inadvertently translated from a visiting scholar into a suspect foreigner. Herzfeld goes a good way to clarify for us the dynamics of his situation. But he resists any final authoritative view because beneath the social idiom of courtesy — in its exigent, tense politeness itself a metaphor of social tension and uncertainty — is the fact that not only are the villagers not sure of the ethnographer, they are not sure of themselves either.

In such an ambiguous situation — inchoate is the term I prefer — one becomes aware that what is likely to be produced by ethnographic inquiry is not so much the right and authoritative account of the local cultural situation but something emergent and intermediary — a *tertium quid*. This is Erik Schwimmer's point in his article, 'The taste of your own flesh', in which he confronts the paradox that what we produce when we go out to observe and stimulate the 'other' to give an account of themselves is not just 'their' text but a 'new' text that partakes as much of the flavor of our own nature and interests as of theirs. A semiotic anthropology, in his view, must recognize the paradox of that text production. It must recognize that while the job of semiotic anthropology is to teach others to teach us their knowledge about human problems, the understandings that emerge from that 'teaching' — a mutual stimulation really — are collaborative solutions and not just the unmediated 'reality' of the 'other'. The uncertainties of the situation we begin with are too uncertain to yield such an authoritative ontology of the reality of the other.

Schwimmer points us to the complexities of the relation between ethnographer and informant and the complexities of the emergent reality that characterizes it. Briggs's examination of the interview situation and his argument for a reflexive use of interview material is congruent with Schwimmer's argument. By bringing a reflective semiotic self-awareness to bear upon the interview situation at the heart of the ethnographer–informant relations Briggs adds both to Schwimmer's contribution — the emergence of an ethnographic culture out of interlocutory activity — and to Herzfeld's clarification of the shiftiness of the ethnographer's role in an implicitly ambiguous and patently ambivalent field situation. The semiotic and paradoxical point of all these papers: as we negotiate identities — ours and others' — so we negotiate the 'facts' of ethnographic rapportage.

Briggs's semiotic stance — and this is implicit in many of these papers — is also characterized by resistance to any reduction or abstraction that

would remove the ethnographer from his inquiry into the actor in his interaction situation in all its complexity. He reiterates Singer's call (1978) for anthropological commitment to a Peircean derived semiotics over against a Saussurean derived semiology. Why? Because, however alert to the dynamics of the linguistic sign Saussurean semiology and its derivatives, such as Lévi-Straussian structuralism, may be, these approaches act (1) to reduce the pragmatic intersubjective communicative situation characteristic of human speech to the semantic structure of language; (2) to concentrate on the linguistic symbol at the expense of the nonlinguistic signs (the Peircean 'icon' and 'index'); and (3) to reduce the triadic semiotic relation of sign, object, and interpretant to the preoccupation with the dyadic relation between signifier and signified, between sign and meaning. Briggs's reflective exploration of his own interviewing reveals to him the insufficiencies of his interviewing technique: (1) his insensitivity to himself as both subject and object in interaction with the informant as both subject and object; (2) his tendency to consider only the speech that could be written down as text as relevant data; and (3) his preoccupation with what was meant — what was being signified by signifiers — in the interview situation rather than what was being negotiated. Briggs's paper, then, like so many in this collection, is an exercise in the coming to terms with semiotic complexity present in ethnographic interaction. He finds profounder understanding of that interaction when he reconceptualizes it in semiotic terms as a tripartite system of signs.

The papers by both Roger Joseph and Margaret Hardin point toward the same profundization of method as is urged by Briggs. Hardin takes the linguistic-Saussurean derived-model of language system and assays its usefulness as an analogy in the study of material culture and art. She demonstrates that visual systems reveal a range of structural possibilities much greater than is expected in language. The notion of well-formedness in the grammatical sense is an inadequate analogy when applied to visual materials. She calls, as do so many papers here, for movement beyond the linguistic sign. Similarly, Roger Joseph seeks to escape a reductionism implicit in the over-application of a given formal analogy. Joseph seeks to reconceptualize economic systems — money, trade markets, and the like — as systems of communication. This will give us a deeper and more interior view of their meaning to participants, he argues, than what is presently achieved by standard economic explanations. Also, he argues that since semiotic analysis makes no specific ontological claims other than to the reality of reciprocal communication as the essential human activity, it is freer of reductionist implications than is any of the prevailing grand theories: formalism, substantivism, Marxism.

Reconceptualization and the paradox of intelligibility

We see in semiotics — in anthropological semiotics at least — a pronounced animus against reductionism and a strong desire to reconceptualize inquiry so that we may enter into the very center of the complex flow of communicative experience and activity. This ‘calling’ of the semiotician poses, however, a significant challenge as well as certain perils. This challenge and these perils are perhaps themselves best conceptualized by reference to the task that all inquiry eventually faces — that of writing up its observations and insights in the face of the paradox of intelligibility and the law of diminishing intellectual returns.

It is the virtue of James Boon’s paper to focus our attention upon the ‘writing up’ itself, and to point up the difference between the rigid routinized monograph write-up of ‘normal anthropological science’ and a truly reflexive semiotic presentation. Allan Hanson in his paper also contrasts the syntactical rigidity of journal write-up in the ‘hard’ sciences — introduction to problem, description of experiment, results of experiment, discussion of relevance of results, conclusion, and recapitulation — with the less pronounced syntactic progression and thus more challenging write-up in anthropology — where writer’s block is an all too familiar phenomenon. Boon compares Frazer’s and Malinowski’s capacity to narrate their materials, ‘to make the familiar look exotic and the exotic familiar’, and their ability to use classical literary analogy and allusion (*Argonauts of the Western Pacific, The Golden Bough*) to intrigue and confirm the Western reader’s interest. Above all, these classic authors had ‘point of view’, a perspective that enabled them both to have a clear sense of other culture’s ‘points of view’ and to sound the tragic, ironic, or comic dimensions of their subject matter. One must prefer Malinowski’s groundedness, his field ‘science’ to Frazer’s confinement in voracious comparativism. But one cannot ignore the power of the latter’s narrative perspective — the tragic-heroic chords he touched in his depiction of the human condition. Malinowski was alive to that power. Boon describes how functionalism after Malinowski lost the freshness of his narrative powers, not to mention those of Frazer, and ground the mechanical metaphor Malinowski introduced to replace Frazerian tragic-allegory into monographic routinization. A stylistic taboo on authorial viewpoint compounded this rigidity.

A semiotic anthropology, Boon thus argues, will be aware in writing up its materials not only of the problems and possibilities implicit in its own point of view but also of alternate points of view (*alternité*) that it itself might have taken, as well as the alternative points of view present in its subject matter. This view of what a semiotic anthropology must be is

congruent with Drummond's inquiry into all points of view that make up the actuality of the Jonestown massacre. But here again, insofar as a semiotic anthropology gives up a mechanical way of presenting the results of its inquiry — gives up an authoritative paradigm — it lays heavy requirements on each new author of each new monograph to reconceptualize the syntax of presentation according to a freshly chosen point of view appropriate to his materials. The challenge to anthropological creativity, thus, is very great.

A semiotic anthropology will be — as is so evident in many of these papers — an ambitious anthropology ever endeavoring to escape reductionism, confront complexity in its lair, and reconceptualize inquiry in the very heat of experience. The anthropology that would, as Boon recognizes, 'renounce the Enlightenment faith in analytic simplicity, direct determinacy, and unmediated communication with the other', an anthropology that seeks radical reconceptualization, is an anthropology that embarks on very high seas indeed — full of opportunity but also of peril. For it will be an anthropology at risk of falling out of communication with those who would most benefit from its message.

This risk can be addressed in a number of ways. But let me address it in terms of the paradoxical problem of clarity and simplicity. We fool ourselves into believing, as far as human experience and behavior is concerned, that simplicity of explanation alone — a simplicity based on the 'hard' sciences' preference for parsimony — obtains the clarity we seek to provide into the human condition, a condition in large part created and suffered by a shifty and self-conceptualizing animal. Simplicity alone will not enable us to conduct inquiry at the center of that condition. For simplicity so often operates on this side of the complexity — as it is said — and a semiotic anthropology so manifestly wishes to work on the far side of the complexity. The paradox of intelligibility for a semiotic anthropology lies in the fact that simplicity and clarity, where the human condition is concerned, are paradoxical objectives ... objectives in tension. What is simple will not clarify and what is clarifying will not be simple. Thus no differently than in any other human endeavor we must, in writing up our materials, constantly negotiate this paradox in making our account as intelligible as possible.

In seeking to negotiate this paradox, in seeking to clarify our materials as simply as possible (the paradox lies also in the fact that we cannot abandon simplicity as a value), we encounter the law of diminishing intellectual returns. And we risk, out of a need to reconceptualize, violating that law. The law of diminishing intellectual returns is the anthropological equivalent of the signal-to-noise ratio or the field-data-to-theory ratio. In a mood of reconceptualization — a mood that is, it

ought to be said, prevalent in the social sciences and not just in semiotic anthropology — we may be overly drawn to conceptual clarifications, to overtheorizing. It is also a way of avoiding the difficult task of fully facing the paradoxes in our inquiry and the difficulties of adopting a point of view toward our field materials. In anthropology, at any rate, where field material has a primacy, that overtheorizing can result in ‘thin’, experience-far, as Clifford Geertz calls it, rather than ‘thick’ experience-near ethnography. If we are to make our inquiry at the center of the human condition and if we are to capture the complexity of communicative interaction and counter the various reductionisms, we must strive to recognize and keep ever-present the constraints of that law.

Beyond literal-mindedness

Semiotic anthropology, it seems to me, is part of a much larger, virtually post-Kantian movement to: (1) intelligibly relate pure and practical reason; (2) adequately grasp human constitutive powers — that is to say, human powers centered on the sign to self-define situations; (3) clearly assess the place of the observer in the constitution of the observed — what we have come to call reflexivity. It has often and most recently been called the movement from an interest in structure and function to an interest in meaning. But I would prefer to call it, because of my own interest in metaphor, a movement against literal-mindedness. In these papers, this is similarly conceived as a movement against ‘literalism’ (Herzfeld) or ‘referentiality’ (Briggs). It is a movement, as we have said, toward the center of human experience, away from the peripheries from where it has so often been studied. What do we mean by literal-mindedness? We mean in most general terms a certain imprisonment of inquiry within established reified and authoritative categories. We mean a failure to have learned, if not the Kantian lesson about the constitutive powers of human thought, at least Max Müller’s insights into the ‘disease of language’ which is to say the permeability of all categories and — despite reification — their susceptibility to transformation and collapse. But let us list some of the characteristics of literal-mindedness as they emerge in these various papers. These would be:

- (1) the assumption that all discourse can have pure referentiality;
- (2) the assumption that signs are context-independent and that there is a transparent and nonreflexive way through to their understanding and translation;
- (3) the assumption that there is one principal code to be cracked in human behavior and that it is not polysemic;

- (4) the assumption that ambiguity is the result of a breakdown in human interaction and that it does not lie at the center of that interaction;
- (5) the assumption that meaning is a thing and not a negotiated and emergent process;
- (6) the assumption that one ontological assumption is privileged;
- (7) the assumption that language codes alone or events coded in language give an adequate account of what is occurring in human behavior;
- (8) the assumption that the writing of ethnography is an obvious and purely mechanical task.

Perhaps all this might be summed up by remembering what my mentor, M. J. Herskovits, used to reiterate frequently, paraphrasing his own mentor, Franz Boas: 'In anthropology a concept is a tool to be held lightly in the hand'. Boas and Herskovits surely had their own particular reasons for saying that — Boas out of his pronounced empirical inductionism (and his resistance, where human diversity was concerned, to generalization), and Herskovits out of his pronounced relativism. A semiotic anthropology could easily espouse similar sentiments, though for other reasons, because of its recognition of the shiftiness and ambiguity of the human sign situation. In undertaking to reconceptualize anthropology in terms of that recognition there are evident rewards and perils. By the evidence of these papers, the illumination provided into human experience and human inquiry is well worth the candle.

References

- Fernandez, J. W. (1975). On the concept of the symbol. *Current Anthropology* 16(4), 652-654.
- Singer, Milton (1976). For a semiotic anthropology. In *Sight, Sound, and Sense*, Thomas A. Sebeok (ed.), 202-231. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

James W. Fernandez (b. 1930) is Professor of anthropology at Princeton University. His principal research interest is expressive culture. His publications include 'The mission of metaphor in expressive culture' (1974), *Fang Architectonics* (1977), 'The performance of ritual metaphors' (1977), and *Bwiti: An Ethnography of the Religious Imagination in Africa* (1982).