

S/A 4074: Ritual and Ceremony

Lecture 16: Language and Performance

* Today we briefly review ritual in terms of language and performance, largely by contrasting Fritz Staal and Ronald Grimes.

* Fritz Staal:

- implicitly drew on Noam Chomsky's idea of "generative grammar" rooted in "linguistic competence" in tacit knowledge (surface and deep grammatical structures)
- argues strongly for the inadequacy of semantic (meaning) interpretations of ritual
- contrasts two types of activity: ordinary, everyday acts and ritual acts. In the former, the results are what count; in ritual, however, it is the rules that count.
- "What is essential in the ceremony is the precise and faultless execution, in accordance with rules, of numerous rites and recitations"
- what makes an ordinary action into a ritual action is not primarily a change in its meaning but a rule-governed change in its form
- ritual is rule-governed activity that can be understood only as such
- the most salient feature of ritual language is as acts that do things, but not as a bearer of information. As "pure" performance, rituals do not have any meaning.
- analysis of the syntactical rules of ritual holds out the promise of a real science of ritual. syntactical rules can explain ritual, not just posit another subjective interpretation
- As a rule-governed activity, ritual is *like* a language but is not actually a language, and for this reason, he goes on to analyze it with mathematical and logical methods
- argues that ritual predates language, as animal ritualization predates human language, and linguistic syntax itself is derived from ritual syntax

* Performative approaches:

- arose in the 1970's
- often try to overcome a tendency to treat action like a text to be decoded
- performance metaphors and analogies allow analysts to focus on what ritual actually *does*, rather than on what it is supposed to mean
- view theater and ritual as a two-way street
- suggest how the realm of cultural ideals actually comes to be embodied in social attitudes and personal experiences and vice-versa
- suggest active rather than passive roles for ritual participants who reinterpret value-laden symbols as they communicate them.
- cultural life involves this dynamic generation and modification of symbolic systems, as something constantly being created by the community.
- change becomes a dynamic process integral to how people live and reproduce culture, not something that happens to a passive and static social entity
- enable consideration of non-intellectual dimensions of what ritual does, its emotive, physical, and even sensual aspects

* Ronald Grimes:

- asks the question: what happens when performances go wrong?
- builds upon J.L. Austin's theory of performative utterances (which distinguishes words that say something from words that do something) to construct a typology of "ritual infelicities"

* Grimes' typology of "infelicitous performances":

(1) Misfires:

Nonplays: procedures do not exist, therefore the actions are disallowed;

Misapplication: legitimate rites involving persons or circumstances that are inappropriate;

Flaws: ritual procedures employing incorrect, vague, or inexplicit formulas (including incorrect nonverbal or gestural formulas);

Hitches: mis-executions of a rite in which the procedures are incomplete

(2) Abuses:

Insincerities: saying - or doing - things without the requisite feelings, thoughts, or intentions;

Breaches: failures to follow through; abrogations of ceremonially made promises;

Glosses are procedures that hide or ignore contradictions or major problems;

Flops: all procedures may be done correctly but the rite fails to resonate. It does not generate the proper tone, ethos or atmosphere.

(3) *Ineffectualities*: are procedures that fail to bring about intended, observable changes. A rite may be properly performed, but it does not produce the goods

(4) *Violations* involve a moral element. Violating rites may be effective, but they are demeaning and seen from a particular moral stance as deficient;

(5) *Contagion* occurs when a rite spills over its own boundaries. It may be effective, but it is uncontained;

(6) *Opacity* involves a ceremony, or part of a ceremony, being experienced as meaningless, unrecognizable or uninterpretable. It either fails to communicate or communicates such conflicting messages that people fail to grasp its sense;

(7) *Defeat* occurs when one ritual performance invalidates another;

(8) *Omission* involves failure to perform a rite when required;

(9) *Misframes* involve misconstruing the genre of a rite. It is like an outsider missing the point, or characterizing the rite as something else.

*Grimes' typology is useful not only in helping to illustrate the importance of the performative approach to ritual, but also in enabling us to consider the consequences of ritual failure. It calls out for further empirical research to refine/expand its categories and deal with the many unanswered questions it raises