

S/A 4074: Ritual and Ceremony

Lecture 16: Language and Performance

In today's class we will briefly review ritual in terms of language and performance, largely focusing on the work of Noam Chomsky, Frits Staal and Ronald Grimes.

Frits Staal followed up Edmund Leach's call for work on the grammatical rules that generate ritual language. This relied heavily on Noam Chomsky's theory of "generative grammar." In this approach, Chomsky was critical of the possibility of uncovering the structure of a language directly from the empirical data of human usage. Instead, Chomsky argued for a focus on the linguistic *competence* of an "ideal speaker-listener...in a completely homogenous speech community," not the linguistic *performance* of the actually spoken language. Therefore, instead of analyzing behavior and its products, Chomsky attempted to analyze the system of tacit knowledge that goes into behavior, a shift from the cultural dimension of language use to the cognitive dimension of linguistic ability. In a second basic argument, Chomsky also suggested that all grammatical expressions have both a surface structure and a deep structure. Linguistic expressions are generated from the deep structure by applying rules, such as rules of transformation and recursivity. Like Levi-Strauss, Chomsky's notion of deep structure suggests the existence of a universal grammar that constrains all particular natural languages; and his work on generative grammar has attempted to construct the syntax underlying all natural languages in terms of an abstract formal system.

Chomsky's methods and model are implicit in Staal's theory of ritual, despite the fact that Staal's conclusions reflect different concerns. Staal first argues strongly for the inadequacy of semantic (meaning) interpretations of ritual. For example, he contrasts two types of activity: ordinary, everyday acts and ritual acts. In ordinary activity, the results are what count, and, for that reason, ordinary activity is very open to spontaneous improvisation. 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." Staal also demonstrates that 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. Hence, he concludes, an ordinary action is turned into ritual action by being subjected to formal rules of transformation. For example, verses from the Indian Vedas are transformed into ritual mantras by virtue of the application of rules that govern their meter and pronunciation. As a mantra, the verse is taken out of its textual context and turned into a series of highly stylized sounds, the meaning of which is of no consequence. Indeed, many Brahman ritual experts are quite ignorant of what the sounds actually mean, but they are highly skilled in rendering them precisely according to the rules. Hence, for Staal, ritual is rule-governed activity that can be understood only as such. Its meaning, he continues, would be nothing more than the various rationales that may have accrued to it over time, and, as such, is of no use in analyzing ritual as ritual. "Like rocks or trees, ritual acts and sounds may be provided with meaning, but they do not require meanings and do not exist for meaning's sake." Indeed, as the most salient feature of ritual language is as acts that do things, not as a bearer of information, Staal has argued that as "pure" performance, rituals do not have any meaning.

Staal argues that analysis of the syntactical rules of ritual holds out the promise of a real

science of ritual in contrast to the descriptive, interpretive strategies generated by semantic approaches concerned with meaning. In other words, syntactical rules can explain ritual, not just posit another subjective interpretation. Staal does not actually deny a semantic dimension in language; he simply denies that ritual is a language. As a rule-governed activity, ritual is *like* a language but is not actually a language, and for this reason, and unlike other linguistic approaches, he goes on to analyze ritual activity, not with the methods specific to linguistics, but with the mathematical and logical methods that, he argues, originally gave rise to linguistics in the first place. Staal concludes, in effect, that ritual predates language, as animal ritualization predates human language, and linguistic syntax itself is derived from ritual syntax. He appeals to ethological evidence to uncover the origins of ritual activity, but more immediately looks to pre-linguistic principles, which are somewhat comparable to those used in Chomsky's generative grammar, to recover the deeper rules that govern and comprise ritual activity. In keeping with the idea that ritual syntax was the root of linguistic syntax, Staal credits ancient Indian ritualists and grammarians with the first science of ritual and the first linguistic theory. Based on analysis of both performed rituals and the knowledge of ritual known to Vedic experts, he identifies several major syntactical rules that constitute the grammatical structure or patterned sequence of ritual activity: recursivity (repetition until a goal is met), embedding (context), and transformation.

If concerns with syntax dominate linguistic and cognitive theories, concerns with both semantics and syntax are prominent in theories of ritual performance that began to gain currency in the 1970's. For a semantic theorist like Milton Singer, "cultural performances" such as rituals, festivals and theater are expressions of the more abstract and hidden structures of the comprehensive cultural system. Others have come to see such activities less as expressions of an existing system and more as the very form in which culture as a system actually exists and is reproduced. Some syntactically inclined theorists, particularly those building on Austin's model of "performative utterances" rather than Chomsky's model of linguistic competence, have used theories of performance to try to overcome the tendency to treat action like a text to be decoded. Performance metaphors and analogies allow them to focus, they say, on what ritual actually *does*, rather than on what it is supposed to mean. While performance theory can appear to be a mass of confusing emphases and agendas, it does represent an important consensus on many aspects of ritual action.

Historically speaking, a number of ideas came together in the mid-1970's to yield a "performance approach" to the study of ritual: Kenneth Burke's discussions of dramatism, Victor Turner's descriptions of ritual as "social drama," Austin's theory of "performative utterances," Erving Goffman's work on the ritual units that structure the performance of social interaction, and Maurice Bloch's analysis of the effects of formulaic speech and song. While myth and ritual theorists had long argued that theater emerged from ritual, performance theorists tend to see more of a two-way street. And although the aesthetic connections among ritual, drama, music, folklore, and dance had been studied, culturalists could see provocative suggestions in the metaphors of drama and performance as to how the realm of cultural ideals actually comes to be embodied in social attitudes and personal experiences. In this way, the old Durkheimian description of how ritual orchestrates experiences of collective enthusiasm so as to mold people's social identities continues to be recast in less functionalist terms - by asking how symbolic activities like ritual enable people to appropriate, modify, or reshape cultural values and ideals.

In particular, performance models suggest active rather than passive roles for ritual participants who reinterpret value-laden symbols as they communicate them. Cultural life has come to be seen as this dynamic generation and modification of symbolic systems, as something constantly being created by the community. From this perspective, change becomes a dynamic process integral to how people live and reproduce culture, not something that happens to a passive and static social entity. The active imagery of performance has also brought the possibility of a fuller analytical vocabulary with which to talk about the non-intellectual dimensions of what ritual does, that is, the emotive, physical, and even sensual aspects of ritual participation. Hence, ritual as a performative medium for social change emphasizes human creativity and physicality: ritual does not mold people: people fashion rituals that mold their world.

One writer that speaks well to such performative matters is Ronald Grimes, who asks the question of what happens when performances go wrong when compared to original expectations. In his paper on ritual criticism and “infelicitous performances,” Grimes argues that a rite, like any other cultural phenomenon, is likely to be less than perfect and therefore subject to creative criticism. Building upon J.L. Austin’s theory of performative utterances (which distinguishes words that say something from words that do something), he goes on to construct a typology of “ritual infelicities” that, among other things, helps flesh out the performative approach to ritual.

Grimes writes that the concept of ritual criticism presupposes the possibility of ritual failure, which has been seldom taken account of in theories of ritual. Engaging in ritual criticism presupposes that rites can exploit, denigrate, or simply not do what people claim they do. What he does is take Austin’s two broad categories of “infelicities” in language (“misfires” and “abuses”), and elaborates a number of subcategories of each in relation to ritual. As well, since ritual is a more complex cultural form than speech, including all its variants plus movement or silence, Grimes goes beyond Austin to elaborate additional forms of infelicity not covered in Austin’s work. I will now go through his typology of infelicitous ritual performance, giving brief examples of each.

I will start with Austin’s idea of “misfires” (i.e. a formula that is ineffective; an act that is “purported but void” like a wedding performed by someone without authority to do so). Grimes comes up with several sub-varieties:

Nonplays are procedures that do not exist, therefore the actions are disallowed. Examples could include invented or recently borrowed rites that are disconnected from the structures that might legitimate them (e.g. someone who designed initiation rites for a church, receiving the reply: “In Christianity we confirm faith, we do not initiate people”).

Misapplication: legitimate rites that have persons or circumstances involved that are inappropriate (e.g. the wrong officiant or the wrong date).

Flaws: ritual procedures that employ incorrect, vague, or inexplicit formulas, including incorrect nonverbal or gestural formulas (e.g. a spell not cast correctly, the wrong gestures or words being spoken, or spoken in the wrong order).

Hitches: mis-executions of a rite in which the procedures are incomplete (e.g. an initiation cut off by a fire alarm).

Next, Grimes goes on to talk about “abuses,” rites that are “professed but hollow.” Like misfires, there are several variants:

Insincerities amount to saying - or doing - things without the requisite feelings, thoughts, or intentions (e.g. televangelists who engage in ritual action as a means of money-making).

Breaches are failures to follow through; abrogations of ceremonially made promises. Since breaches include breaking promises and failure to abide by contracts, it is one of the more familiar types of infelicity (e.g. swearing to keep secret the modes of recognition in Masonic ritual, then publishing them on the internet).

It is at this point that Austin’s original typology ends, but, Grimes moves on to identify further examples not envisioned in Austin’s original scheme:

Glosses are procedures that hide or ignore contradictions or major problems (e.g. going through a baby blessing when the wife has a black eye: few present experience what they would ordinarily).

Flops: all procedures may be done correctly but the rite fails to resonate. It does not generate the proper tone, ethos or atmosphere (e.g. participants not having as good a time as is expected at a birthday party or fiesta).

Ineffectualities are procedures that fail to bring about intended, observable changes. They are more serious than flaws, because flaws are only partial. In ineffectualities, a rite may be properly performed, but it does not produce the goods (e.g. one may not be healed, but die).

Violations involve a moral element. Violating rites may be effective, but they are demeaning and seen from a particular moral stance as deficient (e.g. Aztec human sacrifice, female genital mutilation).

Contagion occurs when a rite spills over its own boundaries. It may be effective, but it is uncontained (e.g. ritual battles may spill over into street violence, such as with violent sports fans).

Opacity involves a ceremony, or part of a ceremony, being experienced as meaningless, unrecognizable or uninterpretable. It either fails to communicate or it communicates such conflicting messages that someone - either participant or observer - fails to grasp its sense (e.g. using a sacred language so much that in time it ceases to create mystery, but instead obfuscates).

Defeat occurs when one ritual performance invalidates another (e.g. going through a rite meant to protect one from spirits being defeated by the “stronger magic” of an enemy’s sorcerer).

Omission involves failure to perform a rite when required (e.g. not engaging in ritual

purification before entering the temple may result in one's request to the gods being denied).

Misframes involve misconstruing the genre of a rite. It is like an outsider missing the point (e.g. it is common for outsiders to think of magic as drama or vice-versa).

Grimes' typology of ritual infelicities is useful not only in helping to illustrate the importance of the performative approach to the study of ritual, but also in enabling us to consider the consequences of ritual failure. He admits to raising more questions than he has answered with this typology, and calls out for further empirical research to test and expand his categories. He asks researchers to consider issues such as: (1) who decides whether procedures fail? (2) the practical interrelation of these types of infelicity (3) the motives and mechanisms for evading the judgement that a rite does not work; (4) the potentially ethnocentric nature of the terms; (5) the need to systematically separate failure in and failure of rituals; and, finally (6) the relationship between ritual "infelicity" and ritual change. All of these performative issues call out for further research and study of ritual today.