

Culture--Old and New

Michael Agar
Presentation #4
UCSB Theme Course

1/24/06

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NOTE TO PARTICIPANTS

This is a preliminary version of the slides I will use for the culture lecture on 1/24. "Culture" is, in my view, the most difficult concept to deal with in the Thematic Course. I am sure that there will be some changes and additions to the slides before the 24th. They will be posted later. In the meantime, this set will give you an advance idea of the general territory I'd like to explore.

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Some Preliminary Cobwebs

- I quit using "culture" but now use it sometimes in limited pragmatic ways
 - The context and meaning questions
 - The translation goal
 - The presupposed and implied
 - History, mostly out of awareness
- But be warned, the concept is a mess

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An Important Meaning of “Culture” Neglected Here

- I’ll neglect a major meaning of “culture,” namely, the uniquely human
- Harder to nail down “unique” now with all the “sliding scale” research with primates and the human genome
- Nonetheless, human universals are key for ethnographic work.
- This lecture, though, foregrounds culture as *differences*

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Culture--The Good Old Days

Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior, acquired and transmitted by symbols constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiment in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (I.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other as conditioning elements of further action.

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Kroeber and Kluckhohn

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But Then Again...

- Studying culture today is like studying snow in the middle of an avalanche (D’Andrade)
- Anthropologists are the ones who don’t use culture (Gumperz)
- Get back to us on the concept later. (The AAA presidential panel)

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The Heartbreak of Culture

- The time/space box
- The postmodern blues
- The objective “other”
- The no good kids hypothesis
- Bad analogies to save the past

Culture is a closed coherent system of meaning and action in which an individual always and only participates? I don't think so. How about “crafting a self?”

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The Heart Attack of Culture

- Culture is constructed
- Partial
- Intersubjective
- More than one is in play
- And they won't sit still
- Generalize to what?

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A Thought Experiment

- 80's rather than 60s?
- Female rather than male?
- Jewish rather than Catholic?
- Mississippi rather than California?
- Spanish rather than English?
- Sales pitch rather than lecture?
- Etc

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Old and New

- Old scientific function of description, explanation and generalization
- New problem of crafting a translation
- “Culture” doesn’t work in any simple straightforward way
- What do we want this partial blurry historically and politically loaded concept to do now?

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Let’s Look At Some Problematic Modern Uses

- Shared activity
- Shared event
- Shared demography
- Shared generation
- Shared geography
- Shared organization
- Shared work
- Shared history
- Shared language
- Shared religion
- Shared what else?

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The “Shared” Theme

- What does “shared” mean?
- Something that enables joint communication and action in a manner not understandable to an outsider
- Grounded in shared activities
- Importance of participant observation
- Activity theory--Yet another thing I need to learn more about

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Is There A Different “Culture” Concept In There Trying To Get Out?

Shared contexts/meanings
between X and Y unknown to Z
the classic ethnographic
problem, however few they
might be

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Problem 1: Don't Know What You've Shared Til It's Gone

- Shared, as in ability to communicate and act in ways not understandable to an outsider
- Lexington baptism
- Whatever “culture” is, the “not understandable to an outsider” is the signal that it's there
- Let's dwell on this for a few slides

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Back to Translation

- Like translation, “culture” is a *relational* concept. Always a *source S* and *target T*. It doesn't make any sense without both. Can't talk about it without specifying both. Culture of and for whom?
- “Culture” names a mediating representation that is contingent on the translation required given contact between a particular source and a particular target. Might require a little, might require a lot.

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More Translation...

“Culture” is about a “shared” that enables joint activity, but culture is only visible when it’s different with reference to a newcomer to that activity. What becomes visible depends on the newcomer, who might be an ethnographer

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What About Insider Trading?

Statements about culture from the inside are part of the shared, by this definition, not part of culture as it is being defined here. Extremely important, both inside and outside, but not the answer to our problems.

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So Back to Rich Points The Signal of “Other Shared”

- The Classic--incomprehension due to major difference between S and T
- The Subtle--S/T comprehension habitual but wrong. Recall context/meaning questions as characteristic of ethno space boundary
- Some points are rich, some achieve richness, and some have richness thrust upon them

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A Thought-Experiment “Measure” of S/T “Otherness”

- India, heroin addiction, independent truckers, and New York
- Amount, frequency and consequence of S/T rich points
- Some shareds more different than others with reference to a particular T
- Again, culture hard to apply

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Problem 2: Multiple “Shareds”

- The ancestral condition and the traditional concept
- Wolf's *Europe and the People Without History* and Steiner's *After Babel*
- And now the global shift, from closed sequence to open dialectic
- No clear sources and targets for translation

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It's Always Cultures

- How does a culture, for a person, relate to other “shareds” for that person?
- How does a culture, for a group, relate to expectations and norms, i.e. social control, that filter out other member “shareds?”
- Other cultures *always* in play.
- So how do we ever generalize from a difference to a culture?

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Dimensions of Source

- Boundary
- Coupling
- Density
- Integration
- Volatility
- But once again, always with reference to the target.

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This Is A Mess

- How do we know that S and T are the right anchors for our translation?
- How do we know we are clear on S and T partiality so we can qualify its application?
- How do we say "culture" and know what we mean?
- Maybe, given popular/political use and problematic professional use, culture's day has indeed come and gone

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So Where Are We With Reference to Culture?

First, culture is relational, involving both source and target, just like any translation. It presupposes a sharedness that only becomes visible in S/T rich points. Amount of difference contingent on which S/T pairs generate the ethnographic problem.

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Second...

We mainly grounded culture in an activity theory framework, where shared activities generate the culture. Note link to participant observation and debates about qualitative research.

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Third...

An ethnographic site is now any group who engage in shared activities, though they may not interact. With local/global frames in play, that site will no longer be the exclusive or even primary source of data, but it will remain the target to be understood and explained

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Fourth...

A culture, a sharedness, can take many different shapes to the translator, depending on boundaries, density, ongoing changes, etc., not to mention his/her image of the T audience, who will in fact represent a different mix of cultures

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Fifth...

And these cultures are always partial with reference to any activity and to any person engaged in them. "Culture" reminds us that though our work may be singular, the world within which we do it is plural. The problem is, to what can we generalize if any moment is a culture blend? Key methodological issue

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Sixth...

An Epistemological Fortune Cookie: When the problem is clear and the concept is not, go with the problem

And remember the quote, Studying culture today is like studying snow in the middle of an avalanche

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And For A Radical View From The Founder...

In fact, my whole outlook on social life is determined by this question: How can we recognize the shackles that tradition has laid upon us? For when we recognize them, we are also able to break them. (Franz Boas)

Fits the biography of many anthropologists but is the opposite of their political agenda

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Return to Complexity?

Towards an Activity-Based Dynamic Semiotics?

- Isn't the culture story just another about closed systems in equilibrium vs open systems that are far from equilibrium?
- Aren't we taking about a concept designed to mean the former and trying to stretch it to cover the latter?
- Are we in the apple/orange orchard, or the political disciplinary jungle?

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Howard Sherman in Open Boundaries

When we try to close systems that in fact cannot be closed, we create a radical incompatibility with nature and business. The consequences of this incompatibility are severe: a retardation of coevolutionary development, a gross limitation of novel innovation and new possibilities, and an eventual and untimely death of the system.

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What Happened?

- The frequency and impact of unexpected change from multiple sources increased
- In a world of increasing connection and feedback loops it was to be expected
- So our efforts to bound a closed coherent equilibrium system of meanings and contexts is retrograde and delusional
- And yet if you look at use, that's often how it seems to be used

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Complex Context and Meaning

- Doesn't mean there's no there there
- Does mean model of translation has to be complex
- Mix of order and chaos
- Trajectories through time
- Sensitivity to initial conditions
- Emergence, etc etc
- All those things we talked about earlier as characteristic of complexity

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A Preliminary Conclusion

- The generalization isn't to how things *are*
- The generalization is to how things *change* with reference to particular activities co-evolving with an environment and the perturbations that impact on them
- And the "things" are not billiard balls in a space
- They are bubbles that join, break apart, form and pop

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Beyond Culture

- In this ambiguity and openness are the resources for change.
- IRA and C/M questions still work, as does 2nd LC learning and translation.
- Constrained by any number of things, including activities

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Ways to Bound a Study

- Linked activities--sequences and cycles
- Follow the perturbation
- Constrained worlds--Hannerz' management of meaning
- Distribution of narratives
- Garfinkeled edges
- All sources of S/T rich points
- But what else is going on within those constraints?

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The Evidence Base

- Has to be motivated by and tested against examples. The anecdote is goal, not the way station. Question is how to pick and use them
- Recall the importance of shift from "variable" to "strip"
- "Ahas" from S and T
- Inclusion of counterexamples and things that don't fit
- Does it work?

Psst, the problems with "culture" still haven't gone away

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In the End..

- Do we try to save "culture" with "dissonant dynamic partonomy?"
- Or do we play the name game with nonlinear dynamic semiosis?
- Or do we refuse to talk about it?
- Whatever we decide, the term will continue in popular and professional discourse, so we need to deal with that

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Final Advice to Fill a Large Fortune Cookie

Keep an eye on what “culture” is doing in the real-time discourse, with an eye on the real issues. If it’s doing the right kind of work, keep quiet. If it’s doing the wrong kind of work, speak up. The “right” kind of work is a better translation between source and target.

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