

ETHNICITY AND COMMUNICATION

Irene Portis Winner

1. Ethnicity and Context. I want to comment on some theoretical assumptions developed in part during my fieldwork in Slovene ethnic communities in Cleveland, Ohio and Hibing, Minnesota.

In the last decades we have begun to understand the typical structure of cultures as pluralistic, composed of ever-changing, hierarchically related subcultures whose significant and subjectively determined differences are called ethnic characteristics, and these define ethnic groups. However, membership in ethnic groups is changeable and not fixed, and thus ethnic culture cannot be seen as permanently affixed to a particular group of culture carriers. Today we reject earlier static approaches to ethnicity, limited primarily to an outer point of view, as unproductive and sterile. Such positions typically centered on the assumptions that ethnic traits were essentially fixed, unchanging and universal elements characterizing discontinuous cultures expressed by discrete groups of people living in a form of isolation defined by fixed boundaries based on geographical, linguistic, social, economic, historical or other criteria. This view assumed that it is the lack of interaction between groups that accounts for ethnic awareness, whereas it has become increasingly clear that, in fact, without interaction between groups there can be no ethnic awareness. For an ethnic group may employ any part of its culture to bring to the fore its own specific and unique characteristics, and such particularities are always seen in contrast to the characteristics of cultures of other groups.

2. Ethnicity and Opposition. We may agree that ethnicity is primarily a phenomenon of meaning affected by changing points of view and changing historical circumstances and contexts, and inseparable from rules or norms that make ethnicity communicable. Here I suggest, as I have commented upon elsewhere (Winner 1978:115) that, in the task of analyzing ethnic culture, the Saussurean concept of relativistic value based on opposition is particularly useful. According to Saussure, value is a concept that may be applied not only to language but to the most varied cultural sign systems. In Saussurean idiom, the value of signs arises from two kinds of relations: through the exchangeability of dissimilar signs and the comparability of a sign to a similar sign. (Saussure 1966:114).

The whole issue of segmentation of nonverbal sign systems, and their differences from language, is being intensively explored today, and I have written about this myself. I would hold that the concepts of the relativity of linguistic signs to other signs and their changeable values can be, as Saussure foresaw, extended to other sign systems that make up a culture, from those of the simplest gestures and rites to those of utilitarian or artistic objects, myth, economic exchange, social stratification, etc.

The importance of opposition in all signs was also recognized by the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce and by Roman Jakobson, who wrote: "The inalienable property of opposition which separates it from all other contingent differences is, when we are dealing with one opposite, the obligatory copresences of the other in our minds. (Jakobson and Waugh: 1979:20). As Jakobson quoted Peirce: "The natural classification takes place by dichotomies" for "existences lie in opposition." (Peirce 1965:437).

Thus ethnic identity is first of all a phenomenon of context, historical as well as synchronic. Turning to Eastern and Southeastern Europe, their complex histories have laid the basis for ethnic distinctiveness, first of all in countries of origin where ethnic identities typically distinguished inhabitants of villages, towns or sections of towns, or larger units, thereby setting them off from contiguous or distant units, and frequently also from ruling classes who represented dominant and frequently foreign cultures. Ethnic identities often became even more marked and differentiated when groups were forced to leave native lands carrying with them memories of past traditions, kinship obligations and the most varied rules and norms that continued to tie them to villages and lands of origin.

It is recognized today that, inspite of the earlier "melting pot" ideology, ethnic identities did not disappear in the New World, but changed instead in ways that were not predicted, becoming new and important forms of cultural communication. Expectations to the contrary, often there was a marked increase of factionalism as well as national feelings of identity engendered by all kinds of internal conflicts as well as by tensions with other subcultures. It is clear that the transformations and changing functions of native institutions, rules and beliefs that were transplanted into the New World must be put into historical contexts, which take into account the force of the traditional cultures including traditional world views and underlying basic values.

In the sense of the above remarks, it is the ever present contrasts that are culturally coded, that potentially distinguish different signs and sign systems, that ethnic culture brings to the fore. It is the differences from, not the similarities to, other features, that are emphasized.

3. Ethnic Culture Texts. A fundamental question is, what kind of unit do we study in attempting to consider ethnicity as a form of communication that brings differences to the fore? Here, the concept of ethnic culture texts is useful. Following the various contributions of the Moscow-Tartu School of Semiotics (Theses, 1973; comments in Winner and Winner 1976; Lotman 1975), we may say that a culture text is a particular kind of message generated by a sender and perceived by a receiver, and this kind of message is at least potentially shareable by the larger group. Furthermore, while such messages are not static or isolated or closed, they are nevertheless somehow bounded and organized by cultural codes. Thus, while they are meaningful, they are only fully understandable in cultural context. A culture text may utilize any channel-auditory, visual, tactile, etc., and any code, and it is multifunctional, dynamic and changeable, and always, since it is significant, translatable into some other human sign system.

Since ethnic culture texts, as opposed to culture texts in general, bring to the fore specific and unique characteristics of the culture of the particular group as contrasted to texts of other groups, such texts have a particular function of commenting on the culture itself. Clearly, whether a culture text is an ethnic text or not depends on its function or use. If it is intended and interpreted, or even just interpreted, as communicating cultural self-identification, then it is an ethnic text. Thus the same text may be merely a culture text in one context and in another context become marked and more informative in such a way that we call it as an ethnic text.

Among the critical issues which must be explored if the concept of ethnic culture texts is to be useful, are: How are ethnic culture texts bounded, that is, how are they set off from other culture texts and from the apparent flux of human behavior in culture? And how so such texts change and interpenetrate? How are such texts structured and typologized? What are their underlying rules and internal components? And how do such organizing rules and components differ from type to type?

The following are some brief comments on some of these issues: As I have noted elsewhere (Winner 1978 b), various principles worked out by the Moscow Tartu School are extremely useful in illuminating the question of textual boundaries. Of fundamental importance is the basic opposition: culture/extracultural space from which it follows that culture bearers, situated in the "center" of their own culture in inner space, see themselves as "we," while others, situated in extracultural space, are "they." Identified with "we" is information and organization, while identified with "they" is entropy or another form of organization. Internal space, itself, is

typically divided into various bounded zones, hierarchically organized, but changeable, and between which there may be cultural collisions (religious, political, etc.). The permutations and complexities of boundaries of culture texts have been dealt with in considerable complexity by Lotman (1975), and I have also discussed the extension of Lotman's principles of boundaries to ethnic culture texts (Winner 1979). Thus boundaries are never permanently fixed and are affected by changing points of view of the culture bearers, by mythological perception of time and space and by basic values and semantic domains of the culture, all of which result in varying cultural evaluations and semantic interpretations of spatial units. Of course in this process, nonspatial as well as spatial relations act as boundaries. Thus economic, religious, linguistic, social, kin and other distinctions are frequently metaphorically spatialized, as was long ago shown in Evans Pritchard's treatment of the Nuer.

Among typical examples of the relativity of boundaries of point of view in ethnic cultures, is the perception by migrant groups, for instance Slovene settlers in the United States, of the location of villages of origin. While such a village may be, in fact, very distant in space, it may be viewed as occupying internal rather than external space if the force of subjective ties to the village so indicates. In contrast, as Kutrzeba-Pojnarowa shows (1982), the town nearest to a home village may be perceived as distant and situated in external space. Yet a trip across the ocean may appear as miraculously achievable, by analogy to mythological tales of conquering heroes. A classic example of the spatializing role of nonspatial cultural texts are the folk costumes described by Bogatyrev (1973), that act as boundary defining ethnic culture texts signifying "our culture" the culture of "our" village, "our" region, as opposed to contiguous or distant other cultures.

How boundaries of ethnic culture texts are penetrated and how they change are central issues since such texts are, by their nature, boundary-crossing texts, if only because their various meanings depend first and foremost upon their opposition to, and often incorporation of, opposing elements existing in texts of other cultures or subcultures. Such contrasts often create montage-like texts that juxtapose dissimilar text segments derived from at least two different cultures. This raises the complex issue of the internal structure, segmentation and other specifics of ethnic texts about which we can only briefly comment here. For example, as I suggest in a forthcoming work (Winner 1983), we need to consider the narrative qualities of ethnic texts. While other culture texts may have narrational characteristics, it seems that ethnic texts have an added dimension of

description since they have a metatextual function mentioned earlier. Thus such texts comment upon the culture itself.

We may take the following example of a narrative culture text which, depending upon context and point of view, may also be interpreted as being an ethnic culture text having a metatextual narrative function. The example also illustrates the montagelike structure which is typical of ethnic culture texts: A woman in a Slovene peasant village follows a particular rule of etiquette, requiring that when guests are present she does not join the group but remains standing while others are sitting in the kitchen, and she serves them coffee which she does not drink. This segment of a culture text may be interpreted by the detached observer to impart information from other systems, for example, about the status of women, of the prestige value of coffee in this culture, and in this sense the text is both a polysystem and a narrative. If, however, this text is repeated in an ethnic situation, in a Slovene household in Cleveland, for instance, the woman is at least subliminally aware that she is extracting a segment from one system (the traditional village culture) and placing it in a new system, that of the larger American society exemplified by the setting (the modern kitchen in a house, in this case in a Slovene settlement in Cleveland, and by many other cultural elements such as the use of the English language, American clothes, etc.). Thus by "quoting" from another text, one derived from the old code, namely "etiquette" in her own village, the woman makes marked and more informative her unique cultural traditions as opposed to other contiguous or impinging customs. The added metatextual dimension of meaning tells us something new, namely how it is to be, in this case, a Slovene in Cleveland. She is also creating a rather simple montage, since she is juxtaposing elements of dissimilar texts from two cultures to create a new ethnic culture text, namely "rules of hospitality in the ethnic subculture of Slovenes in Cleveland."

In general it appears that ethnic culture texts are characterized by a complex integration and transformation of mythological and historical elements which combine with elements from other cultures or subcultures in which the ethnic culture participates or did participate at least subliminally or peripherally. Thereby new internal relations are created and new meanings arise. For example, as I show among Slovenes in Cleveland (Winner 1982a), narrational and montagelike ethnic culture texts that incorporate and transform mythological and historical elements are often associated with carnival-like phenomena in which festivities are based on reversals and liminality.

I recount the following examples, some aspects of which I have described elsewhere (Winner 1979), pertaining to Slovenes in

Cleveland. Festive carnival-like celebrations are held on recreational land located outside Cleveland and owned by Slovene cooperative societies. The atmosphere creates a kind of liminality where time is stopped or reversed and cultural boundaries are transgressed as people join in feasting, dancing, in putting on dramatic skits, and in playing traditional games. There is a breakdown of social restraints or underlying norms between old and young, men and women, suburbanites and inhabitants of traditional ethnic neighborhoods, ethnic language speakers and English speakers, church goers and secular leaders, etc. All are juxtaposed to elements from the new culture including modern clothes, the English language, contemporary gestures, modern American cars and other objects, etc. All of these elements are further juxtaposed to a dominating traditional structure called a *kozolec* which in Slovenia serves to dry hay, while in the new environment it has become a highly condensed sign-text, decorative, aesthetic, commemorative, signaling all the past way of life of another era, thus becoming a quotation from another culture.

Finally we must consider the role of ethnic actors who by their nature express the Peircean dualism commented upon earlier. For the ethnic actor, who creates and interprets ethnic texts, is forever a boundary crosser and a norm violator since this individual always participates in two cultures. We may conclude that an ethnic text is a challenge, for it is always overcoded. Like an artistic text, it employs a plurality of codes, allows for all types of norm violations, and thus give rise to new forms and meanings. While less predictable than other types of culture texts, ethnic texts are highly informative and their investigation is an interesting and important task engaging scholars from all disciplines. For only when we have reached a relatively high degree of sophistication in our study of the ubiquitous, yet highly variable and polysemic, phenomenon we call ethnic behavior, can we hope to achieve more useful intertranslations and deeper understandings of this universal occurrence. I have developed this point in a forthcoming study on Slovene Americans. (See Winner 1983).

Center for Research in Semiotics,
Brown University, Providence, RI

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