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PROLEGOMENA TO A SOCIAL THEORY OF COMMUNICATIVE GENRES

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Introduction: The Sociological Reconstruction of Social Reality

A fundamental postulate of the social sciences is that societies are clusters ("loose" structures, perhaps even "tight" systems) of "objective" data which are either organized in reality, or at least are capable of being organized on several levels: as an ecological system, as a structure of several institutions, as a culture. A correlative assumption is that these structures "determine" social interaction in specifiable degrees with respect to certain elementary "functions" of social life, such as kinship, economics, politics, religion, and so on. In this context the term **objective** means, first of all, that the data can be ascertained independently of subjective whims, that is to say that **inter**subjective agreement about the results of systematic observations is possible in principle. But in the natural sciences the term **objective** has an additional meaning which rests on the (tacit or explicitly stated) ontological premise that the facts upon which the data are based are, in some fashion, "there"—independently of all human activity, even if it is admitted that **scientific** human activity is needed to fashion "data" out of these "pre-existent" facts.

This sense of "objectivity" certainly **cannot** apply to the data of the social sciences. Social facts have come to be "there" only in the form of **pre-scientific** activity and its products. It is merely repeating the obvious (although even the obvious is sometimes willfully ignored) to say that this essential characteristic of social reality does **not** somehow imply that social data are not "objective" in the first sense of the term. The ecology of human societies, their culture, their technological practices and, generally, the social structure consisting of institutionally determined social interactions are ascertainable in that sense just as "objectively" as protons, chemical elements, molecules, or organisms. The intrinsic humanity of social reality does not mean that it is "subjective" in a sense that makes it inaccessible to systematic study of the kind which we dignify with the term "science." It signifies merely that the "objective" data of the social sciences originate in "subjective", i.e., subjectively meaningful human activities: that they are in fact socially constructed.

No doubt I am not the first to assert that reductionism in the social sciences is aprioristic and thoroughly anti-empirical. A social science that is committed to the empirical study of social reality must take systematic account of the intersubjective construction of the reality which it investigates. The methodology of social science is therefore necessarily two-layered. The first layer is reconstructive and the second explanatory. Both layers are necessary in the scientific study of social reality.[1]

In a logical sense reconstruction comes "before" explanation. It establishes the data which are to be explained. The data are not simply there to be observed: they must be recognized, observed, and interpreted. In the reconstruction of the "preconstructed" social realities, interpretation is necessary to establish the typical meanings which these realities have for the human beings who live in them and by them, i.e., for the human beings who are the original "constructors" of meaning in social reality. Controlled and rigorous interpretation must of course follow the general rules of interpretation, a hermeneutic canon. Denial of the need of interpretation (i.e., of this first step in reconstruction) merely results in inadvertent common-sensically naive interpretation which is insensitive to the

facts, as is the case in various reductionist methodologies which concentrate on the problem of explanation ("deduction" or "induction") and neglect the problems of reconstruction. Interpretation situates the meaning of specific types of social interaction in the context of the historically bound experiences of the actors, in the context of their "life-world."

The analysis of social realities **begins** with interpretation, but it of course does not **end** with it. It proceeds to **explain** the "data"—the interpretatively achieved reconstruction of the (preconstructed) social realities—by linking them ("causally," "functionally") to antecedent conditions as well as to consequences. Whereas interpretation follows the general set of hermeneutic rules which is applied to the specific historical hermeneutics of particular cultures and societies, explanation follows the rules of the general logic of explanation which are presumably independent of space and time or, at any rate, of any particular space and time.

It hardly needs to be stressed that most, although by no means all, of the processes by which social realities are constructed are communicative and that **all** the processes by which social realities are reconstructed are communicative. It should be added that explicit formulations of the results of observation and interpretation also characteristically occur in everyday life for all sorts of non-theoretical purposes, in family life, in court proceedings, etc., long before there is any thought of science. Sociological reconstruction of preconstructed social reality therefore includes reconstructions of such pre-scientific reconstructions. In a manner of speaking the methodology of social science consists of rigorous guidelines for secondary reconstructions.

The additional point that most, although by no means all, human communication makes use of language—that specifically human system of signs—needs not be belabored. But it is a point of some importance in situating certain concepts which I should like to present as a first step toward a social theory of communicative genres. This set of concepts is devised so as to systematize the levels of communicative, especially linguistic, processes involved in a social construction of reality.

Communicative Genres within the Communicative "Budget" of a Society

When I use the term "communicative genre" I refer to more or less obligatory solutions to **specifically** communicative problems.[2] Such solutions are available in the social stock of knowledge, although their distribution in the society may be just as unequal as that of any other elements of that stock. There are of course many kinds of communicative processes in any society. There are some which are not congealed in the comparatively rigid form of a communicative genre, or not yet, or no longer congealed. In communicative processes of this kind the actor on the social scene selects elements in a more or less "spontaneous" fashion. He puts together his message step by step without following a clearly defined model of communicative procedure. The speaker forms sentences by taking those words from the semantic inventory of his language which are available to him in his subjective stock of knowledge and which seem appropriate to the purpose at hand. As he forms a sequence of words he follows the elementary rules of syntax, a superordinate, combinatory level of the communicative code. In addition he may use stylistic devices and rhetorical stratagems as he sees fit, and he obeys—or occasionally breaks—the prevalent rules of communicative etiquette. In doing so he is guided by a mixture of habit and explicit intention; occasionally he even follows a communicative plan of his own as part of an interactional project; but he does not assemble the parts more or less routinely according to an established model.

Such "spontaneous" communicative processes are not the only ones to be found in a

society. There are others in which the actor does in fact follow an overall model for joining together communicative elements ("selections" from communicative codes) into units larger than sentences and single messages. This usually occurs in certain clearly defined types of social situation and does not occur in others. There may be situations in which the actor on the social scene is forced to use a particular communicative genre, others in which he is merely likely to do so. Within the framework of the prevailing social communicative norms people often freely choose as they are sometimes forced to choose a model, a communicative genre, in order to put together a larger "message." Within that same framework they may be "forced" to follow the model closely or are "allowed" to play with its inherent possibilities of variation.

Sociologists may be tempted to think of communicative genres as institutions. It is a temptation which they should resist for the sake of conceptual clarity. Social institutions are routinized and more or less obligatory solutions for elementary problems of social life; they organize definable kinds of social interaction.

No doubt it is often difficult to draw an exact line between the **elementary** problems of social life and **specifically** communicative issues. It seems obvious that they must be closely interwoven in human life. Whatever are the basic and essential matters of food and starvation, sex and love, power and justice, life and death, they are always also matters **for** and often **of** communication. But basically these are **not** matters of communication. More precisely, they are first something other than matters of communication. They are originally things to be done rather than things to be talked about. Granted, in human life there is little doing without some talking; and admittedly, in a sense (but in a restricted formal sense only) all talking is doing; nevertheless—to take up the title of a well-known book in the philosophy of language—some, but definitely not all, talking is doing **things** with words. Communicative genres are not social institutions in the strict sense of the term. Should one insist on considering them as institutions, one must remember that they are "institutions" of talking and, more generally, of communicating **about social** life **within social** life. There may of course be instances where social institutions and communicative genres are almost the same. This is the case wherever talking is a constitutive part of the resolution of elementary problems of social life, e.g., a judgement pronounced in court.

Communicative genres are ways in which some, and usually the most important, communicative processes are organized in considerable detail and with some rigidity with respect to their communicative elements. The term does not directly refer to the ways in which social life as such is organized. Before turning to a brief analysis of the **structure** of communicative genres, thus coming to the distinctly "operational" research level of the genre-model, I should like to repeat that the elementary function of communicative genres in social life is to organize, to routinize, and to render (more or less) obligatory the solutions to recurrent communicative problems. Although this may not always necessarily be the case, the communicative problems for which such pre-established solutions tend to be sedimented in the social stock of knowledge are in the main those which have to do with the communicative aspects of those kinds of social interaction which are important for the maintenance of a given social order, and this of course includes many which are institutionalized.

What is important in one kind of society may not be equally important in another, and what is important in one epoch need not remain important at a later date. Different societies do not therefore have the same repertoires of communicative genres; and the communicative genres of one epoch may dissolve into more "spontaneous" communicative processes, while hitherto unbound communicative processes may congeal into new genres. One may

say, however, that at any particular time in any particular society the entire field of communicative genres constitutes the innermost core of the communicative dimensions of social life.

I should like to introduce the term communicative "**budget**" to refer to the whole of the communicative dimension of social life. The term is considerably more abstract than the concept of communicative genre. It should be obvious that under some circumstances almost any communicative process **may** have a bearing upon the maintenance—and transformation—of a society, but it is also clear that, **in fact**, some communicative processes are more important than others from this point of view and that some may be considered trivial and negligible. It is a matter for empirical and systematic cross-cultural study to establish which is which; it is not a matter to be decided in the abstract. Nonetheless, one may be sure that there are some basic problems to be resolved in all societies, that these problems will have a basic similarity one to another, and that therefore some kinds of communicative issues may be universal.

The communicative "budget" of a society consists of different kinds of communicative processes, the difference being not only one of content but also one of form. Much of the "budget" can only be estimated. It is loosely structured and contains "spontaneous" communicative processes. But its most important part has the substantially more rigorous structure of a system. It consists of the **field** of communicative genres.[3]

For a comprehensive accounting of the continuities and changes in the social stock of knowledge and the corresponding transformations in the social structure, one would need to take stock of both the more rigorously and the less rigorously structured components of the communicative "budget" in a comprehensive way. It is evident that a perfectly comprehensive recording and analysis of all communicative processes is impossible, if for no other than technical reasons. Taking samples of all non-trivial communicative processes seems like an obvious solution; the difficulty is that there is no reliable method of deciding, in advance of empirical investigation, which processes not only seem trivial but can in fact be ignored if one wishes to understand the major "cultural" and social transformations. It is however reasonable to assume that many if not most structurally important communicative processes will tend toward crystallization in communicative genres. There need not be a perfect correspondence: not all important communicative processes assume form in communicative genres, and some at least seemingly trivial communicative processes may congeal into genres. Nonetheless a reasonably accurate analysis of the repertoire and the functioning of communicative genres should give a rough estimate of the entire communicative "budget." And even a rough estimate should prove of great value in an area characterized by so much guesswork as is the theory of "cultural" and social change.

The word **budget** is quite appropriate in the present context. The colloquial meaning of this book-keeping term refers both to the precisely established and to only the apparently precise, roughly estimated components. It alludes to exact figures as well as to guesswork. All this nicely captures the heterogeneous elements of a communicative "budget," and provides a good idea of the mixture of reasonably reliable empirical data and a rather speculative estimate of facts which is likely to characterize the study of communicative "budgets."

I would like to add one remark about the methodological status of the two key concepts in this analytical model. The term **communicative "budget"** is a purely analytical term. It is a theoretical construct which refers to nothing that influences social interaction **directly** by entering the orientation of the actors. In the terminology of Alfred Schutz, it is a second-order construct without any immediate connection to the first-order constructs

which inform the common sense of the actors on the social scene.[4] **Communicative genre**, on the other hand, is a theoretical second-order construct based on common-sense first-order constructs. I do not mean to imply that the actor on the social scene needs to have an articulated theory of genres. He may tell a joke without being able to say why he tells it in precisely that fashion; but he has knowledge of the dangers to be avoided unless he wants his joke to fall flat. Incidentally, although an articulated theory of genres is not a prerequisite for a "working knowledge" of genres, much less for their semi-automatic employment, ethnological, historical, folkloristic, and more recently sociological studies have amply documented the wide distribution of "folk"-theories on genres.

The above is offered by way of a discussion of the two key concepts in an analytical schema; this schema is presented in the following self-explanatory Tables I, II and III.

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NOTES

1. I hardly need to stress that these remarks summarize the Weberian and Schutzean positions. The methodological programme which I think follows from these positions has received an attempt at formulation in T. Luckmann, "Philosophy, science and everyday life," 143-85 in Maurice Natanson, ed., *Phenomenology and the Social Sciences* (Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), reprinted: 3-39 in T. Luckmann, *Life-World and Social Realities* (London: Heinemann, 1983).
2. The history of the concept of genre started with Aristotle; the concept continues to be a subject of debate in literary theory to this day. It has been taken over and adapted, by Bakhtin among others, in modern folklore studies and to some extent also in the ethnography of communication. Below I list only a few, not quite randomly-selected, titles from which a sociologist unfamiliar with the literature can receive a first taste of the nature of the problem.
3. I use this term in analogy to the term **semantic field** in linguistic theory. This means that communicative genres are defined not only by a comparatively rigorous organization of their component parts (which distinguishes them from "spontaneous" forms of communication), but also by their systematic relation to one another. In a "field" of genres changes in one genre have consequences for all the other genres.
4. Cf. Alfred Schutz, "Common-sense and scientific interpretation of human action," 3-47 in A. Schutz, *Collected Papers I* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1962).

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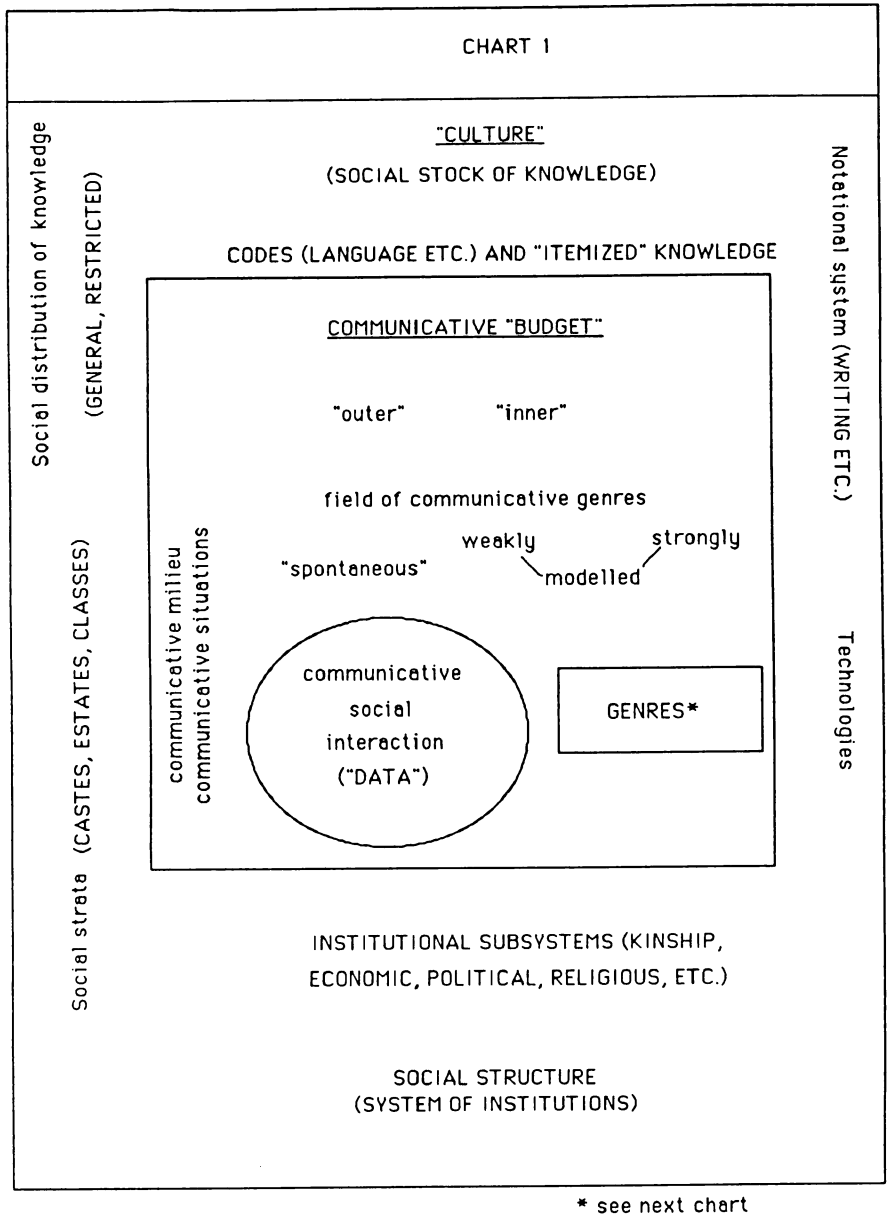
CHART 1
Social distribution of knowledge
(GENERAL, RESTRICTED)
Social strata (CASTES, ESTATES, CLASSES)
"CULTURE"
(SOCIAL STOCK OF KNOWLEDGE)
CODES (LANGUAGE ETC.) AND "ITEMIZED" KNOWLEDGE
COMMUNICATIVE "BUDGET"
"outer"
"inner"
field of communicative genres
communicative milieu
communicative situations
"spontaneous"
weakly
strongly
modelled
communicative social interaction ("DATA")
GENRES*
Notational system (WRITING ETC.)
Technologies
INSTITUTIONAL SUBSYSTEMS (KINSHIP, ECONOMIC, POLITICAL, RELIGIOUS, ETC.)
SOCIAL STRUCTURE
(SYSTEM OF INSTITUTIONS)
* see next chart

CHART 2

COMMUNICATIVE GENRES

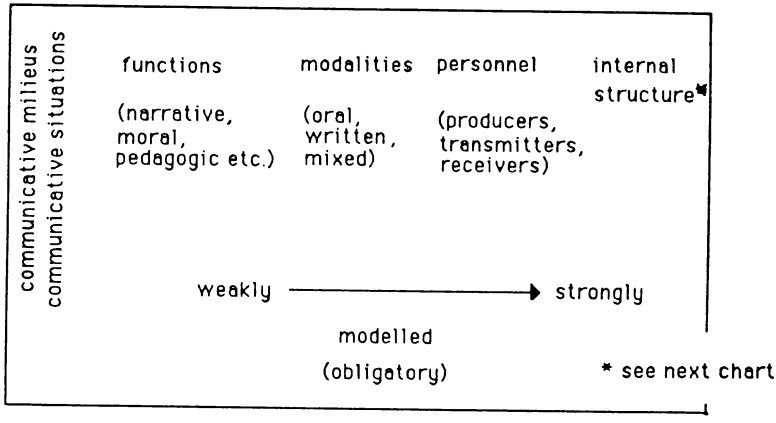

CHART 3

INTERNAL STRUCTURE OF COMMUNICATIVE GENRES

fixed contexts	
fixed "textual" elements on different levels:	REGISTER FORMULAIC "BLOCKS", ETC.
fixed discourse strategies	TURN-TAKING, THEME SELECTION, REPAIR STRATEGIES, ETC.
fixed prosody (fixed gestural, mimetic etc.) elements etc.	

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POVZETEK

PROLEGOMENA K SOCIALNI TEORIJI KOMUNIKACIJSKIH GENROV

Avtor govori o tem, kako se prenašajo različne vrste znanja - vsaj do neke mere - v zelo organiziranih in ustaljenih oblikah. Te oblike so neke vrste komunikacijski genri, to je več ali manj ustaljeni modeli sporočanja, še zlasti ko gre za socialno pomembnejše občevanje. Ti modeli so lahko predpisani, ko gre za njih leksične, sintaktične, mimetične, gestikulacijske elemente, in obvezni v odnosu za njih socialno funkcijo, situacijo in okolje. Komunikacijski genri so jedro vsega komunikacijskega "budget"-a neke družbe. Tak strukturirani inventar možnih "rešitev" problemov sporočanja v neki družbi, se loči od kulture do kulture; spremembe v takem inventarju lahko v zgodovini neke družbe služijo kot pomemben pokazalec splošnih značilnosti družb in kultur.