Between Action and Power

A Perspective on Symbolization and Ritual Efficacy

Author: Viktor Lundh

Supervisor: Christer Lindberg

Time of submission: December, 2014

Table of content

1 Introduction

1.1 Prologue: The Power of Giving

In his terse book *The Gift: The forms and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* from 1950, Marcel Mauss argues that the three obligations of gift exchange – to give, receive and reciprocate – are universal and render such exchange a system of *total service* (1950: 13). Such systems, at once economical, religious and moral, give expression to the entirety of social institutions and thus constitute *total social phenomena* (Mauss, 1950: 3). Toward the end of unraveling the inner workings of the total social phenomenon of gift exchange, Mauss asks, "*What power resides in the object given that causes its recipient to pay it back?* [italics original]" (ibid: 3). Even though the answer to this question, by now, is somewhat of an anthropological axiom, it is worth revisiting since it neatly frames the subject of this paper – the relation between symbolization and power. This introductory presentation argues that Mauss's account involves two different understandings of power, exercised in Polynesian and the Northwest American gift exchange respectively. In contempt of its subtlety, this distinction opens up an array of questions which will be addressed in the second part of this paper. One might think of the next page and a half as, much like a musician, setting the tone.

We start by briefly considering the Northwest American institution of *potlatch,* characteristic of the Tlingit and Haida societies, where the power aspect of gift exchange is most conspicuous (ibid: 34). The potlatch is a system of gift exchange through which rivaling tribes contest in status. In short: one tribe invites another to celebrate a certain occasion during which the hosting tribe expends and destroys a significant amount of its possessions – foodstuffs, valuable copper objects, whale oil, etc. – towards the end of "'flatten' one's rival", who, by accepting the invitation, is under the obligation to re-invite the host to a subsequent celebration of its own (ibid: 37). The obligation to accept an invitation and, in turn, invite, is mandatory and failure to do so has fatal consequences; "To give is to show one's superiority [...] To accept without giving in return, or without giving more back, is to become client and servant." (ibid: 74). Thus, the act of giving imposes power relations between agents as the part unable to reciprocate is punished with slavery for debt (ibid: 42). Furthermore, the paraphernalia of potlatch are, according to Mauss, symbols of rank; by demolishing them one exhibits one's

wealth and power. Accordingly, the institution is an example of how symbolic statements and acts impose power relations between various individuals (ibid: 44).

Whereas Northwest American gift exchange is motivated solely by antagonism – threat of violence or loss of honor – the motivation for the Polynesian[1] variant involves a moral element (ibid: 7). Discussing the motivation behind the Polynesian gift exchanges, Mauss writes that they are "acts of politeness […] in which economic transaction is only one element" (ibid: 5) and that "one gives because one is *compelled* to do so, because the recipient possesses *some kind of right* of property over anything that belongs to the donor. [italics added]" (ibid: 13). The Maori tradition of giving *taonga* ("everything that can be exchanged" (ibid: 10)) is adduced as an example: when Kiri gives Mere a piece of *taonga*, who in turn gives the *taonga* to Ngaio in exchange for another *taonga*, Mere is obliged to give that *taonga* to Kiri – to reciprocate the initial *taonga*. According to the Maori, it would not be fair of Mere to keep the *taonga* herself (ibid: 11). Moreover, Mauss writes that "[t]his […] will give the donors authority and *power* over the first donor, who has become the last percipient. [italics added]". Now, this is not the same kind of power as the one exercised in the Northwest American system of gift exchange. The obligation to return *taonga* is due to the fact that it contains *the spirit* of the giver; the recipient is obliged to reciprocate by giving back some of his/her spirit (ibid: 12). Ergo, the circulation of *taonga* is partly motivated by religious and moral principles, the maintenance of which is a goal in itself. The general attitude is, according to Mauss, that "one clearly and logically realizes that one must give back to another person what is really part and parcel […] of his soul." (ibid: 12). Consequently, the notion of power involved in the Polynesian case is more subtle and opaque than the one involved in the Northwest American case: it is not power manifested in serfdom. Even though the institution of Polynesian gift exchange is partly motivated by status, prestige and even antagonism, Mauss's account suggests that the moral nature of gift exchange does *in itself* motivate action in a way that seems to be lacking in the Northwest American case. Yet, how should we understand reasons for action seemingly independent of desire? How are they related to symbolization? According to Abner Cohen, answering such questions amounts to an untangling of the central theoretical problem in social anthropology: the relationship between symbolic action and power relations (1974: 13). One way

---

[1] Henceforth, *Polynesian* denotes the Samoan and Maori societies discussed in the first chapter of *The Gift*.

of approaching Cohen's problem runs via the seemingly eternal topic of symbolization, to which we now turn.

1.2 Background: The Symbolic and Interpretative School

The 1960s, together with the first half of the 1970s, was the era of unrest – both civic and academic. Whilst the subversive spirit of the counterculture raged on the streets to the tunes of psychedelia, a similar, albeit more sophisticated, revolution unfolded in the anthropology departments. Arguing that culture is irreducible to sheer material circumstances – be they Marx's means of production or Steward's ecological conditions – anthropologists such as Marshall Sahlins, Clifford Geertz, Victor Turner and Mary Douglas replaced the enterprise of *explaining* social phenomena by subsuming them under general laws, with a semiotic approach revolving around *understanding* cultural meaning by means of interpretation. This method is commonly known as symbolic and interpretative anthropology and can be viewed as a synthesis of hermeneutical techniques developed in literary theory and modes of analysis inspired by structural linguistics. Naturally, symbolic anthropology regards the symbol as indispensable for penetrating the various idioms in which people interpret and express culture. In this view, symbolism, akin to language, is a mode of communication – a shared system of meaning – the analysis of which is the very definition of anthropology. Culture, then, is a mental construct communicated symbolically and manifested in people's interpretations of events and things surrounding them (McGee, 2012: 438). Notably, within this general framework, quite different accounts of symbolism have been defended. The depth of symbolic anthropology is demonstrated below by considering Turner and Geertz's respective theories, which in a sense mark the onset and conclusion of the paradigm. However, before delving into this more thorough analysis, the width of interpretative and symbolic anthropology is demonstrated by briefly reviewing the works of a few prominent contributors to the school, each more or less personifying a certain theme.

Over the course of her two highly influential books, *Purity and Danger* (1966) and *Natural Symbols* (1970), Mary Douglas developed a theory of symbolization according to which the salience of symbolic and ritual aspects of a social system correlates with the degree of social pressure and coercion exercised therein. A somewhat thematic line of reasoning for

anthropologists steeped in the interpretative and symbolic tradition is that the symbolic constitutes the very precondition for human cognition and that, consequently, communication necessarily proceeds through symbols. Douglas voices this credo by writing that symbolic boundaries are both "necessary […] for the private organizing of experience" (1970:53) and the gateway to the *other's* cosmology (ibid: 154). Douglas's cardinal concern is with a specific kind of symbols labeled *natural symbols*. In the crudest sense, a symbolic system is natural if it is anchored in the experience of the physical body (ibid: xxxiii). Departing from the assumption that the physical body is a potent symbolic locus for the social system, Douglas maintains that culturally specific conceptions of the body – foremost manifested in dietary and purity rules – provide a potent channel for understanding how people conceive of the social system in which they are enmeshed (Douglas 1970:xxxvii). Indeed, in *Natural Symbols*, Douglas sets out to "[...] identify four distinctive systems of natural symbols, […] social systems in which the image of the body is used in different ways to reflect and enhance each person's experience of society" (ibid.: xxxvii). Natural symbols, then, are a concrete portal to an abstract social dimension. Accordingly, interpretation of symbols takes the detour of the empirically conspicuous bodies of the informants; "the social experience of disorder is expressed by powerfully efficacious symbols of impurity and danger" (ibid: 90). In the end, Douglas's theory makes a forceful case for the merits of symbolic anthropology as it reaches outside academia in providing a method – the condensed version of which urges us to "[b]eware […] of arguments couched in the bodily medium" (ibid.: 179) – for detecting dogmatic social systems.

Another scholar influenced by the symbolic and interpretative school, and whose work likewise provides an efficient social critique is Sherry Ortner. In an attempt to untangle the question of how certain symbols manage to sum up a particular culture's ethos and worldview, Ortner launches the notion *key symbol*. As their name suggests, these are symbols that, once understood, unlock the cultural logic influencing the actions and thoughts of the informants; they are prerequisites for investigating the phenomena which they articulate (Lambek, 2008: 157). Social phenomena, in other words, are most adequately interpreted against the background of key symbols. The set of key symbols divides into two subsets: *summarizing* and *elaborative* symbols, respectively "[...] seen as summing up, expressing, representing for the participants in an emotionally powerful [...] way, what the system means for them", and elaborating upon complicated feelings and concepts, thus rendering them communicable (ibid: 154). Among the

features enjoyed by a key symbol counts its tendency to appear in disparate social domains and the fact that it is enveloped in explanatory and emotionally charged commentary (ibid: 153). Like Douglas's, Ortner's work amounts to a cogent social critique. In her much acclaimed 1974 article "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?", Ortner straightforwardly spells out why women universally are perceived as inferior to men. Seeing as the female is a symbol for nature whilst the male symbolizes culture and that, in turn, things related to nature are subordinated things related to culture, Ortner infers that the perceived inferiority of women has a symbolic basis (1974: 71-5). Converted into an action plan, Ortner's article proposes a possible approach for dispatching the disabling mindset assuming the subordination of women (ibid: 68).

Marshall Sahlins's seminal work *Culture and Practical Reason* (1976) concludes this antecedent historical survey. Even though this particular book (which reads quite like a manifesto for symbolic anthropology) is quite comprehensive, the leitmotif is the primacy of the symbolic over the material. In arguing that the symbolic order is the chief determiner of human action and social development, Sahlins polemicizes with theoreticians such as Karl Marx and Julian Steward who respectively reduce the symbolic to mere material and ecological conditions. Contrary to their views, Sahlins holds that the material base of any social system is always filtered through a prior symbolic scheme determining how such a base is perceived and acted upon. Putting the materialist assumption on its head, the particular means of production exhibited in a certain society are, according to Sahlins, a function of the symbolic order; "Tallensi farmers are not related as father and son by the way they enter into production; they enter thus into production *because* they are related as father and son [italics added]." (Sahlins, 1976: 9) Were this not the case, cultures subjected to similar material circumstances would resemble one another to a substantially higher degree than they actually do; "it is […] common anthropological knowledge that the 'rational' and 'objective' scheme of any given human group is never the only one possible" (ibid: 168). Thus, Sahlins considers culture as an autonomous object of investigation and, in effect, the discipline of anthropology vital (ibid: 102). Turning his gaze homewards, Sahlins places the West on par with the *Rest* in regards to the prominence of a symbolic mode of thought. Instead of modelling society as a function of monetary transactions conducted by pragmatically minded agents toward the goal of material fulfillment, one needs to consider the underlying symbolic structure rendering such activities meaningful in the first place; "the social meaning of an object that makes it useful to a certain category of persons is no more

apparent from its physical properties than is the value it may be assigned in exchange" (ibid: 169). Sahlins concludes by depicting the exchange of goods in capitalist economies as an instance of symbolic communication through which social categories are reproduced, in the same stroke granting the term *totemic* wider application (ibid: 185).

1.3 Objectives

If the aforementioned discussion shows anything at all, it serves to demonstrate the vastness of social phenomena articulated through the symbol-vocabulary: cutting across the abstract-concrete spectra, the symbol is simultaneously the linchpin of human cognition and solid physical bodies. This fact alone stimulates an investigation into exactly what it is about symbols that grant them such universal applicability. One possible route of analysis runs into the domain of anthropological theory construction and the various attempts to pin down the constituents – *sign symbol*, *symbolizing*, *signifying*, *meaning* etc. – involved in the notion of symbolization. Indeed, this is the route pursued in the current paper.[2] Initially, the logical structure behind Geertz and Turner's respective notions of symbolization is made explicit by isolating the relevant predicates and their corresponding relata sets. Consecutively, the weaknesses of Geertz and Turner's definitions are demonstrated at some length with the aid of a few well-chosen critics. Such a demonstration paves the way for the formulation of three criteria of adequacy which a theory of symbolization need to consider in order not to fall into the same trap as Geertz and Turner. Bearing these criteria in mind, the paper proceeds by articulating and, subsequently, specifying Stanley J. Tambiah's theory of ritual efficacy to the effect of relating the concept of symbolization to that of deontic power. Upon concluding, an evaluation and possible application of Tambiah's refined theory is conducted. Thus, this paper is disposed around the three overarching questions:

(1) What composes symbolization according to Geertz and Turner?

(2) Which are some criteria of adequacy for a theory of symbolization?

(3) Which features of a theory of symbolization are conducive to satisfying such criteria?

---

2 In the course of reproducing the various theoreticians' positions, terms such as *concept*, *notion, predicate* and *idea* are used interchangeably to denote theoretical entities ranging over empirical data. In section 3.3, the term *notion* is used to denote linguistic entities.

Whilst the first two questions are answered in section 2, section 3 answers the third.

1.4 Scope

In the broadest sense, this paper concerns theories of symbol*ization* (as opposed to symbol*ism*) revolving around concrete usage; in other words, the relation between symbolic action and its perceived meaning. Accordingly, the pending analysis leans quite heavily on theoreticians such as Geertz, Turner and Tambiah, on pain of excluding structuralist accounts in the spirit of Claude Lévi-Strauss. Justifying this selectivity requires a reproduction of some relevant aspects of Lévi-Strauss's anthropology.

Symbolic order, according to Lévi-Strauss, exists independently of both the things symbolized and the people who symbolize. Singular instances of symbolization – manifested in classification schemes, kinship structures, myths etc. – are unconsciously produced symptoms of the universal structure of human cognition (Lindberg, 2005: 267). Venturing beyond such ephemeral symbolic acts, structuralism purports to explore an allegedly objective and eternal realm of symbolic meaning. In this view, the meaning of a particular symbol is solely a function of its relation to other symbols and, ultimately, deducible only from the total sum of symbolic orders (McGee, 2012: 320-1). In Lévi-Strauss's words, "Signifying is nothing but establishing a relation between terms." (Lambek, 2008: 204). These theoretical assumptions entail a methodology of comparing different complexes of symbols for the purpose of mapping their interrelations – their *deep meaning*, as it were (Lindberg 2005: 268). Concrete symbolic usage, then, enjoys a meaning detached from such transient aspects as the intentions of the one doing the symbolizing and the various interpretations of the act by other agents in the community.

The potential merits of such a conception of symbolic meaning may or may not be worthwhile; nevertheless, the stance arguably downplays the actual apprehension of symbolic meaning by the ones doing the symbolizing; in the end, the key to symbolic meaning exclusively resides in the anthropologist's armchair. As the subject of this paper centers on the emically perceived meaning of concrete symbolic usage, structuralist theories fall outside the present scope – their influence on the debate notwithstanding.

1.5 Terminology

Before moving on, some notes on terminology revolving around the term *intersubjectivity* and the use of variables are presented. The controversy surrounding the notion of intersubjectivity is mentioned as it figures latently throughout this paper. One rule of sociological method postulated by Durkheim in his book with the similar title proclaims that "collective thinking in its entirety […] must be studied in itself and for itself" (Durkheim, 1982: 42). Upon elaboration, it is stated that collective thinking, or collective consciousness, "express […] the way in which the group thinks of itself in its relationships with objects which affect it." (ibid: 40) Even though such collective representations manifest themselves in the behavior of individuals proper, they are never – due to their all-embracing character – fully realized in any one individual at a specific moment in time (ibid: 131). In line with his realism, Durkheim's discussion of collective consciousness concludes by claiming its irreducibility to individual minds; the collective and the individual occupy separate spheres of reality and are subjects to different kinds of laws (ibid: 41).

An opposing view of intersubjectivity is taken by the philosopher John R. Searle, who uses the term *collective intentionality*. Firstly, intentionality is defined as "that capacity of the mind by which it is directed at, or about, objects and states of affairs in the world, typically independent of itself." (Searle, 2012: 25). Put differently: intentionality is the mind's capacity to refer to something in a certain psychological mode (e.g. being *afraid* of dogs or *loving* dogs). Among the most basic examples is intentionality expressed in first person singular sentences such as "I intend such-and-such". Collective intentionality on the other hand, is intentionality expressed in first person plural form – e.g., "We intend such-and-such" – and is accordingly analyzed in terms of individuals trying to achieve a common goal by making separate contributions; "In such cases, I am doing something only as part of our doing something." (Searle, 2006a: 16) Collective intentionality, then, is a state of mind realized in individual agents. Accordingly, the fundamental difference between Durkheim and Searle's respective accounts of intersubjectivity is that the latter does not consider it irreducible; no mysteriously autonomous social dimension is presupposed (Searle 2006b: 61). Overall, Searle's account enjoys a considerably higher degree of stringency than Durkheim's. For those reasons, the term

intersubjectivity is, at least in the concluding part of the current paper (section 3.3), treated as synonymous with collective intentionality.[3]

As regards to the recurrent use of variables, some aspects deserves to be mentioned for the sake of clarity. First off, every variable used is explicitly defined upon introduction. Generally, the symbols − *A, X, Y, C, P, a, x, y, p* − used for representing variables denote different sets of entities or individual members of such sets throughout the paper; they are simply a means for delineating the logical or syntactical structure of certain notions and do not in themselves carry semantic baggage. The significata of the variables are indicated by expressions such as "let *X* denote such-and-such" or "The *X*-term is satisfied by such-and-such". Moreover, upper-case variables denote abstract properties or sets of things whilst a lower-case variable denotes a concrete entity or a member of a set. In the latter case, the "same" lower-case letter (e.g., *x*) is used when a concrete entity is a member of an abstract set denoted by the corresponding upper-case letter (e.g., *X*). Lastly, note that expressions such as "*p*-symbol", "*p*-symbolic" and "*p*-symbolization", occurring in section 3.3, do not involve variables. As will become apparent, the *p*'s figuring in these expressions indicate that the notion of symbolization in question is but *one* possible notion of symbolization(s), as opposed to symbolization in general.

---

3 Since a full discussion of the similarities between Searle and Durkheim's respective social ontologies is outside the scope of the current paper, the interested reader is directed to Searle's article "Searle versus Durkheim and the waves of thought: Reply to Gross" (2006b) for a further discussion on this topic.

2 General Theories of Symbolization

2.1 Clifford Geertz and the Untiring Symbolizer

Geertz conceives of cultures as texts and thence objects for interpretation. What is interpreted is symbolic behavior; culture unfolds as a narrative driven by a series of symbolic actions and statements open for interpretation by both informant and anthropologist. Geertz, therefore, is involved in a *double* hermeneutic in which the anthropologist interprets his/her informants' interpretations of their own culture (McGee, 2012: 438). The justification for this characterization of culture is twofold: Geertz both argues that its philosophical underpinning is sound, and that it makes for a beneficial analytical tool.

The notion of the symbol is the mainstay in Geertz's theoretical edifice *The Interpretation of Cultures* from 1973. During the course of this book, most of the generic anthropological analysanda are one after the other traced back to one mutual root: the symbol. Most importantly, the notion figures in the definition of culture, whose definiens can be summarized as "[an] interworked system of construable signs [...] something to which social events, behaviors, institutions, or processes can be causally attributed" (Geertz, 1973: 14).[4] Besides culture, the list of anthropological concepts reduced to symbols contains ideology (ibid: 220) and religion (ibid: 90). Furthermore, statements such as "[i]t is [...] not truth that varies with social, psychological, and cultural contexts but the symbols we construct in our unequally effective attempts to grasp it" (ibid: 212) are symptomatic for the prominent role given to the notion of the symbol by Geertz.

---

4 Traditionally, authors writing from the interpretative and symbolic perspective distinguish between *sign* and *symbol*. The former is usually conceived of as an entity *indicating* a certain state of affairs, whereas the latter is generally thought of as an entity *representing* another entity in the abstract. For instance, the sound of rain is a sign indicating that it is raining, whilst a proper name symbolizes its bearer, irrespective of prevailing states of affairs (Langer, 1951: 57-9). However, Geertz does not address this distinction apart from writing that, "[...] construable signs (what, ignoring provincial usages, I would call symbols)" (1973: 14). The present paper will only consider symbols in the aforementioned conception.

A closer reading of the article "Religion as a Cultural System" reveals how Geertz understands symbolism in the broadest sense. Here, the author gives the following informal explanation of a symbol: "any object, act, event, quality, or relation which serves as a vehicle for a conception – the conception is the symbol's 'meaning'". He then continues by adducing the number six, the Guernica and the morpheme "-ing" as examples of symbols (ibid: 91).

Throughout his discussion on symbolism, Geertz refers extensively to the philosopher Susanne K. Langer, particularly her book *Philosophy in a New Key,* which presents a logical analysis of symbolization. Langer holds that symbols are vehicles for the conception of objects and that they, accordingly, get their meaning from associative relations to the conception in question (Langer, 1951: 61). Langer's full unpacking of the formula "*X* symbolizes *Y*" – where the *X*-term denotes the set of symbols and the *Y*-term denotes a concept or conceptions – culminates in the paraphrase "the symbol is related, for a specific agent, with a connotation through which the agent conceives the object" (Langer, 1951: 64). Whilst symbolization (or denotation, in Langer's vocabulary) is a strictly logical operation exploiting the semantic relation between symbol and concept (i.e. the sum of all individual conceptions), connotation is psychological and arbitrary; it regards the ideas associated with the subjective conception of an objective object. For instance, when we use the symbol "James" to symbolize a certain person and mistakenly suppose that it connotes a man with such-and-such characteristics "we are not mistaking James for someone else, but we are *mistaken about James*." (ibid: 65)[5] Langer also ascribes the symbol an essential explanatory role in defining *ritual* as the active termination of a symbolic transformation of experience born of an elementary need to manipulate symbols (ibid: 45). Both Langer and Geertz thus hold that the referent of the symbol is a conception of an entity.

Drawing on the philosopher Gilbert Ryle's theory of the mind, Geertz deems the symbol integral for understanding human nature. *Mind*, according to Geertz, is "a term denoting a class of skills, propensities, capacities, tendencies, habits"; in other words, an organized system of dispositions that manifests itself in actions and objects (1973: 58). In this view, the mind is – contrary to the behaviorists – irreducible to sheer behavior as it instead consists of a set of

---

5 This is a simplistic reproduction of Langer's quite comprising theory of symbols. Since Geertz's is content with holding that conceptions are the referent of symbols, Langer's full account would confuse more than enlighten. Therefore, interested readers are referred to chapter three of Langer's book (1951).

dispositions to act, think and feel that, in turn, are *deducible* from observable behavior (Geertz, 1973: 59). Importantly, the set of dispositions composing the mind involves tendencies to manipulate symbols in such a way that situations are made intelligible, a property by Geertz regarded as necessary for human cognition. This account echoes Langer's, whose definition of mind likewise involves a disposition to interpret symbols. Nevertheless, Langer carries the analysis to its logical peak by holding that the current of passing experience is transformed into symbols which we think with; experience "is sucked into the stream of symbols which *constitutes* a human mind [italics added]." (1951: 42) This feature renders human cognition intersubjective, rather than subjective, in placing the symbols by means of which the mind operates in an intersubjective sphere.

Another quite thematic line of reasoning, unfolding piecemeal over several articles, states that the symbol is a precondition for human cognition, emotion and intersubjectivity (Geertz, 1973: 49, 141). The basic idea is that "[t]hinking consists [...] of a traffic in [...] significant symbols", including everything from words and pictures to physical objects. One must employ and interpret symbols in order to coherently structure the events of everyday life; to orient oneself within "'the ongoing course of experienced things.'" (ibid: 45) Such orientation encompasses the emotional aspects of events as well: just as a road map might be used to make the way from one destination to another, a novel by Franz Kafka might enable one to form a certain attitude toward bureaucracy (ibid.: 81).

It should also be noted that the Geertzian symbol functions as a model *for* and a model *of* some domain of reality simultaneously. If x is a symbol and y is some concrete domain of reality, then x relates to y in two ways:

x functions as a model of y if x renders y intelligible through representation and x functions as a model for y if x is used in the construction of y.

Even though the relation between the two functions is never explicitly addressed, Geertz's argues that it is this double function that most conspicuously sets the symbol apart from related notions (ibid: 93). However, we previously noted that the meaning of a symbol is a conception of the entity which the symbol in question purports to signify. Seemingly, the entity predates any

conception of the entity; therefore, it is uncertain whether the non-symbolic entity which the symbol is a model *for* is part of the symbol's meaning.

By now, we can conclude that Geertz's notion of the symbol is an unary predicate satisfied by all and only those entities serving as a precondition for cognition, emotion and intersubjectivity by imposing order on experience and function both as a model for and model of a non-symbolic domain of reality. Consequently, the logical structure of symbolization takes the general form:

$$X \text{ symbolizes } Y$$

Where *X* is the set of all symbols and *Y* is the set of subjective conceptions of an objectively available entity – the intersubjective *meaning* of the symbol, as it were. Furthermore, the relation *symbolizes* is, in Langer's sense, a semantic convention.

Equipped with a more exact rendition of symbolization, Geertz proceeds by allying the notion with neighboring concepts. For example, the notion is linked to *cultural action*, which is "the construction, apprehension and utilization of symbolic form", through the fact that the symbolic is an abstraction from such action; cultural action is a guide to the various conceptions composing the symbol's significata (ibid: 91). Moreover, symbols are *extrinsic sources of information*, meaning that they populate an intersubjective sphere against the background of which public behavior takes shape – hence the empirical availability of symbols (ibid: 92). It is also suggested that the symbol acquires empirical content through cultural action; "[w]hatever, or wherever, symbol systems 'in their own terms' may be, we gain empirical access to them by inspecting events" (ibid: 17).

It is the empirical availability of the symbol that permits Geertz's famous thick description, which first appears in the article "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture". By outlining the contours of this narrative device, an elucidation of the relation between symbolization and context is achieved. An initial formulation of the thick description is accomplished by means of contrast: A wink can be described in physiological terms, cultural terms or both. A *thin* description purely reports the physiological aspect whilst a *thick* description views the wink as a symbol and renders it intelligible by interpreting it against the background of the cultural context in question (ibid: 6). A thick description is always a

second order interpretation of the alleged symbolic system within which the informant operates. According to the methodological implications of such a double hermeneutic "we begin with our own interpretations of what our informants are up to, or think they are up to, and then systematize those" (ibid: 15). Even though the thick description, to a certain degree is fictional, Geertz reckons it conducive for an anthropological strive for objectivity. Moreover, a thick description should be judged by its ability to channel a new perspective to the reader – "to bring us into touch with the lives of strangers" (ibid: 17). Another condition imposed by Geertz on the thick description is that it must discriminate what is *said* in the cultural action (ibid: 20). The *said* denotes the symbolic structures against the background of which cultural action is enacted and interpreted. Thus the anthropologist's "task is to uncover the conceptual structures that inform our subjects' acts, the 'said' of social discourse [...]" (ibid: 27).[6] It can therefore be concluded that the thick description is the anthropologist's fictional interpretation of the idioms in which the informants understand their lives, alternatively, of which relations hold between the alleged symbolic system in question and the cultural actions which it informs. The logical structure of symbolization – "*X* symbolizes *Y*" – must then be extended to include the wider symbolic system, subsequently taking the form:

$$X \text{ symbolizes } Y \text{ in context } C[7]$$

If one were to summarize the main tenets of Geertz's theory, one could start by saying that the vocabulary of technical terms stemming from the notion of the symbol (e.g., religion, ritual, ideology and culture) finds a concrete expression through tangible cultural actions and statements which, accordingly, are described in observational terms. This, in turn, is possible in the light of an extrinsic theory of cognition stating that thinking is performed through intersubjective objects: "[t]hinking, conceptualization, formulation, comprehension, understanding, or what-have-you, consists [...] of a matching of the states and processes of

---

6 Raymond Firth makes a similar point in writing that "the anthropological approach […] has as objective to provide a systematic description and analysis of [...] a symbolic act in its verbal and non-verbal aspects; to distinguish those parts of the action held to be significant from those which are incidental." (1975: 27)

7 Henceforth, this formula is simply denoted *the general formula*. Note that this formula is given different interpretations by different theoreticians. As we shall see, the set of entities satisfying the *X*-term is in Turner's theory a subset of the set adduced by Geertz.

symbolic models against the states and processes of the wider world" (ibid: 214). Then, there is the thick description utilizing the intersubjectivity that occurs when the concrete world of meaningful actions produced by emic symbolic interpretation (satisfying the *Y*-term in the general formula) meets the abstract world of symbols (satisfying the *X*-term); it grants the reader access to the *other's* point of view by unveiling the logic behind the symbolic system (denoted by the *C*-term) in which the informants operate by correlating symbolic structures with actions. Finally, the whole enterprise is anchored in the definition of *mind* as a set of dispositions to manipulate intersubjective symbols. It is thus clear that one aspect of symbolic meaning is the action produced by the employment of symbols – a theme which is revisited in the second half of this paper.

<div align="center">***</div>

In order to fully evaluate (see section 2.3) Geertz's theory of symbolization, a reproduction of his analysis of the Balinese cockfight is necessary. Geertz demonstrates the relation between symbolic structure and cultural action by analyzing the Balinese cockfight as a piece of cultural text unfolding by continuous symbolic enactment. The cultural context in which Geertz develops his famous interpretation of the Balinese cockfight – the village of Tihingan, in the Kungklung region of southeast Bali – is heavily impregnated with cock-symbolism. Since the associative relation between the cock and masculinity is the same in Bali as in English speaking countries, the cock is a potent channel for understanding Balinese attitudes toward status and power (Geertz, 1973: 447).

Statements referring to roosters are symbolic: the word *cock* itself – depending on the context – denotes a hero, a warrior, a champion, as well as a lady killer or a tough guy. The average Balinese man spends the majority of his time grooming and discussing his rooster; for instance, sitting with the rooster between his legs and bouncing it up and down in order to strengthen it, or pushing it toward a neighbor's rooster to inflame its fighting spirit only to calmingly withdraw it the next moment (ibid: 419). The cardinal signifiers of the cock are the magnification of the owner's masculine self and his inner animality, or darkness. Quite naturally, the cockfight is a forum for both ventilating potential animalistic desires and proving one's masculinity (ibid: 420). Even though such conclusions suggest a functionalist analysis of the

cockfight, the fact that these fights are autonomous events – the gaining or loss of status occurring therein have no bearing outside the arena – points to an alternative interpretation of the phenomena. Through the concept of *deep game*, Geertz argues that the cockfight is an expression of the Balinese culture at large and that each fight is a concrete manifestation of the various hierarchies permeating the Balinese social system. Indeed, such an analysis is emblematic for anthropologist's writing from a symbolic and interpretative perspective according to which culture is embedded in people's own interpretations of events and things around them. Thus, the cockfighters and audience members are both enacting certain structural features of their social system veiled by everyday life and interpreting them simultaneously (ibid: 449). However, for present purposes, it is Geertz's argument, rather than his conclusions, that are of relevance.

Geertz adduces a distinction between *deep* and *shallow* play in order to demarcate cockfights of symbolic character – as described above – from merely practical ones. The distinction is defined with reference to the dual betting system: The types of bets performed in a cockfight are either center or peripheral. Center bets are large and collective bets between the owners of the fighting cocks and their respective kinsmen, whereas peripheral bets are small and individual bets between the members of the audience. Moreover, the center bet is organized and handled by the umpire whilst the peripheral bets are impulsive and somewhat happenstance (ibid: 425). The higher the center bet is, the higher and more even the peripheral bets are. This is due to the fact that a high center bet indicates a close matchup and even odds – a *deep play* (ibid: 430). Now, why would even odds, counter to rational thinking, raise the bets? Geertz explanation is that monetary risk-taking is a symbol of moral import rather than utility and playing deep is a way of gaining status; "[i]t is in large part because the marginal disutility of loss is so great at the higher levels of betting that to engage in such betting is to lay one's public self, allusively and metaphorically, through the medium of one's cock, on the line." (ibid: 434) By this device, the actions and utterances – the betting – occurring in deep plays are interpreted as symbolic. The actions and utterances involved in shallow play, characterized by uneven odds and lower bets are, on the contrary, interpreted as practical; "[i]t is, in fact, in shallow games [...] that increments and decrements of cash are more nearly synonyms for utility and disutility, in the ordinary, unexpanded sense for pleasure and pain, happiness and unhappiness." (ibid: 433) Furthermore, the shallow play attracts the pathological gambler pawning his/her belongings in wish to break even (ibid: 434). In short: *ceteris paribus*, the more even the odds are, the higher

the bets and deeper the play is; the deeper the play is, the more symbolically charged the actions and utterances are.

2.1.1 Critique: deduction of the distinguishability and evaluation criteria

I. C. Jarvie's article "On the Limits of Symbolic Interpretation in Anthropology" contains a number of arguments aimed at bringing the symbolic and interpretative school in anthropology to more realistic altitudes. The author claims that his critique besets the entire paradigm as it primarily targets statements such as "the ritual action […] serve to 'say something' about the social situation and the social condition of the parties involved, they do not express the sum of Aboriginal knowledge" (Leach, 1966: 41) and "[...] the cockfight is – or more exactly, deliberately is made to be – a simulation of the social matrix […] in which its devotees live." (Geertz, 1973: 436) According to Jarvie, such "something's" and simulations are the anthropologist's own imaginative constructions unfruitfully muddling the actual meaning of informants' utterances.

The underlying problematic of symbolic anthropology – whose cardinal assumption according to Jarvie is taken to be the belief that "all human actions have a significance beyond any stated or manifest purpose, [...] they symbolize [...] something." – is its inherent distinction between *practical* and *symbolic* statements. The first term denotes statements referring to the concrete, ostensibly available surrounding whilst the second term denotes statements referring to metaphysical ideas or social relationships (Jarvie, 1976: 687). For the present purposes, the most important criticism that Jarvie brings forth is the arbitrariness involved in separating the first kind of statement from the second. Firstly, the mechanism behind discriminating between practical and symbolic statements seems to be subjective as every statement, in order for its truth value to be assessed, initially must be treated as practical and only afterwards, depending on the results of the evaluation, be rejected as symbolic. Secondly, even if there was such a demarcation, there would be no objective method of interpretation to aid the understanding of the symbolic patterns (ibid: 689). In Edmund Leach's own words: "How do I know such patterns are significant? *I don't*. I find them interesting [italics added]" (1966: 45).

One does not have to delve further into this polemic in order to see that the general problem is one of interpretation, namely: which statements are symbolical and which are the

criteria for interpreting such statements?[8] Thus, Jarvie's article points to the indeterminacy of interpretation and can be read as a guide for formulating criteria for objectively assessing whether a statement or act is symbolic or practical, and which of contesting interpretations of a given symbolic statement or act is more probable. Therefore, it is arguable that every theory of symbolization need include at least one un-arbitrary mechanism for (1) determining whether a statement or act is symbolic or practical and (2) evaluating contesting interpretations of symbolic statements or acts. The first is *the criterion of distinguishability* and the second is *the criterion of evaluation*. The criterion of evaluation does imply that there is but one absolute interpretation of a given instance of a symbolic statement or act, namely the function it has for the informants involved. However, various instances of superficially the same symbolic statement or act allow different interpretations under different circumstances. It should be noted that a theory satisfying the criterion of evaluation is of limited value if it simultaneously disrespects the criterion of distinguishability. Similar meta-discussions have been conducted by rather esteemed anthropologists. For example, Firth deduces a set of criteria for the proper employment of terms such as *sign*, *icon* and *symbol*. In short, Firth advices anthropologists to ask themselves the question; "What phenomena are classed as symbolic and what criteria are used for identifying them?" (1975: 37).[9]

Given the inclusive scope of Geertz notion of the symbol, it is *prima facie* plausible that his analysis lacks proper mechanisms for distinguishing between practical and symbolic statements, let alone mechanism for evaluating competing interpretations of symbolic statements. Moreover, it is uncertain whether Geertz, defining symbols as vehicles of thought and *a fortiori* every statement as symbolic, even agrees with such a distinction in the first place. However, some examples given in the aforementioned analysis of the Balinese cockfight suggest that

---

8 Even though Jarvie limits his discussion to symbolic *statements*, I also include symbolic *acts* in the following analysis. The definition of "*p*-symbolic act" will be given in section 3.3.

9 Firth's own contention is that symbolization, in the most general sense, consists of a symbol with a complex series of associations describable in terms of partial representation (Firth, 1975: 75). Although such representation gives an arbitrary impression, a more precise set of significata discloses itself as the anthropologist ventures into the operational function of symbols in a certain context (ibid: 76). A possible mechanism for distinguishing between practical and symbolic statements is – for the sake of example – thus constructible with reference to the different kinds of uses of such statements.

Geertz at least distinguished between degrees of symbolic content: Firstly, there are descriptions of informants' behavior that would come across as rather awkward if taken as symbolic. For example, the practice of strengthening and inducing a fighting spirit in one's rooster by pushing it toward a neighbor's rooster would – given that the rooster symbolizes the owner's masculinity – mean that the owner actually pushes *himself* toward the neighbor, in an act of inflaming his own fighting spirit, something which is quite unlikely given Geertz's characterization of the generic Balinese (outside the context of the cockfight) as extremely afraid of conflicts (Geertz, 1973: 446). Secondly, the statement that the deeper the play is, the more symbolically charged, suggests that statements and actions enjoy degrees of symbolic content. On Geertz account, the mechanism for establishing such a degree seems, at least partially, to be defined in terms of risk-taking. A high bet is to a higher degree symbolic than a low bet whereas some bets (e.g. those forwarded by gambling addicts in shallow play) lack symbolic content entirely and are explicitly interpreted as practical actions. Nonetheless, such a mechanism is arbitrary at best since it does not consider the relative aspect of destitution. According to Geertz's reasoning, the gambling addict pawning his belongings in order to bet in shallow plays is acting more symbolically than an affluent person betting in deep plays since the he/she takes the higher risk. A possible objection to the present interpretation of Geertz's analysis is that it ignores the other criteria for determining the statement's degree of symbolic content. For instance, Geertz writes that a cockfight between high status individuals is more symbolically charged than a fight between low status individuals; the low status of the participants in shallow play renders the fight less symbolically charged (ibid: 441). Unfortunately, status is defined in terms of risk-taking, which – as noted above – is relative. This being said, the idea of letting the context define the mechanisms for distinguishing between practical and symbolic statements and actions might turn out fruitful – as will be demonstrated below.

2.2 Victor Turner and the Untiring Interpreter

Turner, belonging to the generation of anthropologists prior to Geertz, represents a somewhat different approach – theoretical as well as methodological. While Geertz gives transcendental arguments for the prominence of symbols, Turner, grounding his discussion in extensive ethnographic data, justifies his theory of symbolism in structural functionalist terms as an

explanation for social dynamism (McGee, 2012: 439). Another difference between the two writers is that Turner's account unfolds *a posteriori* as the anthropologist ventures deeper into the Zambian forest, while Geertz, to greater extent, develops his *a priori*; the arguments are not couched in empirical data.

Quoting the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, Turner begins the article "Symbols in Ndembu Culture" from 1958, by defining *symbol* as "a thing regarded by general consent as naturally typifying or representing or recalling something by possession of analogous qualities or by association in fact or thought." Most of the article is dedicated to the explication of this, rather vague, definition against the background of actual Ndembu symbol use.[10] Turner's gateway into Ndembu symbolization is the ritual: the symbol is "the smallest unit of ritual which still retains the specific properties of ritual behavior […] The ultimate unit of specific properties of specific structure in a ritual context" (Turner, 1967: 19). Furthermore, the symbol aids the understanding of social action as "[e]ach kind of ritual is a patterned process in time, the units of which are […] items of symbolic behaviour." (ibid: 45) Among the many informal examples given of the symbol counts objects, activities, relationships, events, gestures and spatial units in a ritual context (ibid: 19). It can thus be concluded that Turner, in concert with Geertz, proposes the triadic structure of symbolization: *X* symbolizes *Y* in context *C*.

The *X*-term in Turner's vocabulary denotes the set of *dominant,* or *ritual* symbols*,* a set of symbols producing actions and overall behavior in a ritual context as well as representing axiomatic values regarded as ends in themselves (ibid: 20). Formally, the dominant symbol necessarily has three properties: (1) *condensation*, meaning that "[m]any things and actions are represented in a single formation", (2) *unification*, referring to the fact that a dominant symbol illuminates the interconnectedness of seemingly disparate significata and (3) *polarization*, according to which a dominant symbol has two poles of meaning; the *ideological* pole, referring to "components of the moral and social orders" and the *sensory* pole, in turn, designating "natural and physiological phenomena" – the symbol's external representation (ibid: 28). As an example of a dominant symbol Turner gives the milk tree in the context of the *Nkang'a* (the

---

10 Turner spent a career in the Zambian forest living among the Ndembu, a collection of tribes of particular anthropological interest as the symbolic and ritualistic elements are quite ubiquitous in Ndembu culture. The interested reader finds an outline of the Ndembu lifestyle in the introduction to Turner's 1967 book *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*.

girls' puberty ritual). The milk tree has the property of condensation since it admits several meanings. Over the course of five pages, the milk tree's flora of significata is arduously spelled out, which – *inter alia* – includes: human breast milk, breasts simpliciter, the bond between mother and child, matriliny, the unity and continuation of Ndembu society, knowledge (according to one informant the novice "drinks sense as a baby drinks milk" (ibid: 53) – much in the same manner as westerners might "thirst for knowledge"), social differentiation, women as a social category, the solidarity of women, group harmony, the coming-of-age of the novice herself, the conflict between girlhood and adulthood, the opposition between the novice's mother and other tribeswomen, and lastly, virilocal marriage (ibid: 20-5). As this list demonstrates, the milk tree has the properties of unification and polarization. Firstly, the milk tree unifies such different ideas as breast milk and social differentiation. Secondly, the milk tree has an ideological pole – consisting of referents such as women as a social group and the continuation of Ndembu society – as well as a sensory pole – consisting in significata on the theme of breasts. Moreover, the milk tree produces action as women dance around it and mobilize in opposition to men (e.g., women sing about how men are not allowed near the milk tree during *N'kanga*).[11]

A lot has been said about the meaning of a dominant symbol (the *Y*-term in the general formula) in the aforementioned discussion without much precision. In the article "Ritual Symbolism, Morality, and Social Structure among the Ndembu" from 1963, the meaning aspect of symbolization takes center stage. A dominant symbol has three fields of meaning: *exegetical* meaning, *operational* meaning and *positional* meaning. The exegetical meaning is "obtained from questioning indigenous informants about observed ritual behaviour." (ibid: 50) In conversation with his Ndembu informants (mostly the key informant and friend, Muchona), Turner notices that their interpretations revolve around two aspects: the etymology of the symbol's name and the physical properties of the symbol. For instance, according to Turner's informants, the *musengh'u* tree derives its name from *ku-seng'uka*, "to multiply" because the tree bears a great number of tiny black edible fruits. In gynecological rituals it represents "a

---

11 It should be noted that Turner contrasts the dominant symbol with the *instrumental* symbol. The latter term denotes the set of symbols regarded as means for attaining the overall goals of the rituals in which they figure. For instance, parts of fruit-bearing trees are used in women's fertility rituals since, according to the Ndembu, the fruits represent children (Turner, 1967: 32). There are two reasons for excluding the instrumental symbol from further analysis: apart from the above, not much is said about it, and its relation to the dominant symbol is unclear.

multiplicity of offspring" and in hunting rituals it represents "a multiplicity of killings" (ibid: 289). Equating, on the other hand, the symbol's meaning with its actual use amounts to its operational meaning. Hence, the facts that, during *Nkang'a*, only the senior women of the novices' village are allowed to dance around the milk tree in the early morning and that they mock the novices' mothers when they try to join, points to social disharmony (ibid: 56). Lastly, and drawing on structural linguistics, positional meaning is a function of the relationship between the symbol in question and the total symbolic structure in which it is enmeshed (ibid: 51). The positional meaning of the milk tree, Turner laconically exemplifies, is a product of its association with symbols of suffering and dying (ibid: 52). It should be noted that positional meaning is an abstraction from the exegetical and operational meanings and thus not directly available to the anthropologist. This tripartite definition of symbolic meaning has the merit of explaining how the semantic structure of a dominant symbol develops from the concrete to the abstract – in the case of the milk tree: from the breast, via the mother-child bond, to the Ndembu society at large (ibid: 54).

Turner's focus on ritual displays the relevance of context (denoted by the *C*-term in the general formula) in general and the role of symbolic action in particular. Of the two main types of context posited by Turner: *action-field* context, which ranges from a series of rituals to a single ritual, and the wider *cultural* context "in which symbols are regarded as clusters of abstract meanings", it is the action-field context that renders symbols empirically available through cultural action (ibid: 43). Preceding Geertz, Turner writes that "[s]ymbols instigate social action. In a field context they may even be described as 'forces,' in that they are determinable influences inclining persons and groups to action." (ibid: 36). An action-field, then, is a structure of relations abstracted from the data obtained about the symbol's operational and exegetical meanings (ibid: 116). The cultural context, on the other hand, is worked out by the anthropologist and mainly regards the symbol's positional meaning. It is often the case that dominant symbols take on more abstract meanings in a cultural context – as noted above, Turner hypothesizes that the milk tree represents societal continuity. The analysis of symbolic meaning then starts off by considering the widest action-field context, namely the series of rituals in which the ritual containing the symbol under scrutiny is a phase (e.g., a *rite de passage*). At this level, the circumstances – natural phenomena, life-crisis, social crisis – which the ritual addresses and which partly determines the meaning of the symbol, are salient (e.g., in *rite de*

passage, the circumstance concerned is life-crisis). The next step of analysis narrows the action-field by focusing on the specific ritual in which the symbol is used, where the symbol's exegetical and operational meanings are inferred (ibid: 45). Moreover, the same dominant symbol can take on different, even contradictory, meanings in different action-field contexts. The color red, for example, represents both illness and health depending on the action-field (ibid: 70).

The aforementioned reproduction demonstrates that Turner, in line with Geertz, deems the logical structure of symbolization to take the form "*X* symbolizes *Y* in context *C*" where the relation *symbolizes* is an act wherein a dominant symbol (the set of which satisfies the *X*-term) is manipulated in an action-field context (denoted by the *C*-term) to the effect of altering some aspect of the social system; for instance, individual status ascription or change in social relations between agents. The relation *in* is important since dominant symbols are only meaningful as long as they are ritually enacted. The nature of the alternation in status brought about by symbolic usage is determined by the meaning (referred to by the *Y*-term) imposed on the dominant symbol. Accordingly, the behavior produced by the manipulation of dominant symbols in an action-field context is a function of its interpretation by the agents – its exegetical and operational meaning. The anthropologist's task is then to, by means of observation and interrogation, map the operational and exegetical meanings and, by means of comparison, positional meaning of the dominant symbol.

2.2.1 Critique: deduction of the closure criterion

As has been demonstrated above, Turner alludes extensively to the notion of meaning in delineating the extension of the *Y*-term in his interpretation of the general formula. In postulating a three level analysis of symbolic meaning, Turner places numerous – according to Dan Sperber, even "all the conceivable" – properties of the symbol under the vastly inclusive category of meaning. Sperber presents an efficient critique of Turner's lax usage of "meaning" (Sperber 1975: 13).

Sperber labels the kind of entity which has meaning a *code*. A code is defined as a set of pairs consisting in a message and an interpretation (henceforth denoted: "{message, interpretation}"). The meaning of the message is decoded by the interpretation through some

univocal and generalizable mechanism (ibid: 14).[12] The symbol is an instance of the message, but what kinds of things constitute interpretations? One possibility is the one forwarded by Turner, who postulates the three pairs: symbol and exegesis (exegetical meaning), symbol and usage (operational meaning) and symbol and other symbols (positional meaning). As demonstrated above, the positional meaning is an abstraction from the exegetical and operational meaning. The exegetical and operational meanings, in turn, are according to Sperber not instances of meaning-relations at all since the exegesis and usage paired with the symbol do not, contrary to their pretense, constitute its interpretations. Instead, exegesis and usage are simply *motivations* for certain fixed translations of the symbol to which they are paired and must be interpreted in their own right. Turner thus makes a category-mistake in taking usage and exegesis as interpretations rather than motivations for translations (ibid: 34).[13]

Sperber implies that the exegetical commentary of a symbol generally takes the form *a symbol is translated such-and-such because of such-and-such a motivation*. For example, the translations of the symbolic *museng'u* tree as – depending on the context – "a multiplicity of killings" or "a multiplicity of offspring" championed by Turner's informants are, as described above, motivated by physical and etymological properties. Now, the motivation for a certain translation is, according to Sperber, neither part of the interpretation of the symbol (as Turner has it), nor a meta-symbolic commentary void of symbolic content: it is symbolic in its own right.

Sperber's justification for the claim that the motivation for a translation of a certain symbol is not part of the symbol's interpretation is twofold. The first justification runs as follows: The motivation for a certain translation of a symbol does not affect the semantic properties of the translation; therefore, the motivation is redundant in the interpretation of the

12 In light of the controversy surrounding the philosophical debate over the nature of meaning, it should be mentioned that no claim to the definition of meaning as a relation between message and interpretation is forwarded in the subsequent sections. Talk about emically perceived meaning should, on par with Geertz, be understood as the informant's way of making sense out of a symbolic act (see section 3). Accordingly, Sperber's account is used strictly heuristically toward the end of formulating the criterion of closure.

13 The term *category-mistake* was coined by the philosopher Gilbert Ryle in the book *The Concept of Mind* to denote the fallacy of mistakenly assuming that an entity belongs to a certain logical category when it in fact belongs to another such category. The person strolling around the city of Lund in order to locate the University, which the person believes to be a single building, is thus committing a category-mistake in assuming that Lund's University consists in a concrete building rather than an abstract organization (Ryle, 1949: 16-17).

symbol. Sperber asks us to consider the case of the roar. In spite of the motivation for naming the cry emitted by a lion a "roar", it does not alter any of the semantic properties of the word itself – "one can understand perfectly the meaning of the word 'roar' while being ignorant of what a roar sounds like". As evidence, Sperber claims that the sentences "The lion roared" and "The lion emitted its characteristic cry" allow the same paraphrases and can be contradicted in the same ways – they have the same truth-value, as it were (ibid: 25). The second justification for the claim that motivations are not part of interpretations takes, in turn, the following form: Motivations need be generalizable in order to be part of the symbol's interpretation; motivations are not generalizable; therefore, motivations are not part of the interpretation of the symbol. The primary justification for this line of reasoning states that the processes behind establishing meaning cannot be completely arbitrary; the manner in which the interpretation decodes the symbol need be univocal. Unfortunately, motivations are arbitrary: they are postulated *ad hoc* – after the meaning already has been established. As an example, Sperber adduces the case of the Cross being a symbol for the Christian religion *because* Christ died on a cross. By the same token, the cross could as well end up symbolizing crime, since numerous criminals have met their fate in a similar fashion (ibid: 28).[14] To reiterate, the underlying principles of such generalizations are formulated *ad hoc*, after the meaning of the symbol has been established. The *limited* set of symbols thus admits an *unlimited* set of possible interpretations.

The justification for the statement that motivations, even though they are external to the semantic properties of the translation, are symbolic in their own right builds off of the previous discussion in claiming that an entity becomes symbolic in virtue of the motivation applied to it. Returning to the roar-case, Sperber compares the sentences "The lion roared" and "The lion RRrroared". The sentences have the same truth value since "RRrroared", once interpreted as a roar because it sounds like the lion's cry, reads "roar" (ibid: 30). In this way, a motivation (in this case "RRrroared") is itself symbolic and in need of interpretation – "[f]or all keys to symbols are part of symbolism itself." (ibid: 50)

---

14 Note that the present notion of motivation concerns not only motivations for specific translations of symbols but also ranges over motivations for a specific ritual *use* of a symbol. Consequently, Turner's operational meaning suffers from the same difficulty as his exegetical meaning; "the exegetical motivation of *museng'u* poses the same problem as the ritual use of the *museng'u*: they are both based on a principle which is not generalisable [...]" (Sperber: 1975: 29).

Sperber concludes that Turner's ethnographical material amounts to a set of clues by means of which Ndembu experience is organized (*chiljikijilu*, the Ndembu word for symbol, corroborates this conjecture as it also means "a landmark organizing our experience of space") but nevertheless begs the question of the symbols' meanings (a word lacking a proper Ndembu counterpart) – a question which Sperber considers fallacious: talk about meaning only "prevents us from asking, 'If not meaning, what?'" (ibid: 33).[15] If Jarvies and Firth opt for limiting the scope of the *X*-term in Geertz's interpretation of the general formula, Sperber does the same thing for the scope of the *Y*-term in Turner's. This contention is captured in a *criterion of closure* stating that a theory of symbolization need include a univocal decoding relation holding between symbol and interpretation, closing the given set of (symbol, interpretation) pairs to the effect of excluding the postulation of *ad hoc* and un-generalizable relations between symbol and interpretation. In other words, the interpretation must decode the symbol through a univocal and generalizable principle. Whereas the criterion of distinguishability concerns the detection of symbolic acts and statements, the criterion of closure concerns the relation between symbol and signification.

***

Before concluding, I would like to consider a possible contradiction in Turner's theory of symbolization that is relevant for the evaluation of his account (section 2.3). In the article "Color Classification in Ndembu Ritual: A Problem in Primitive Classification" from 1965, Turner continuously makes claims such as, "To be 'white' is to be in right relation to the living and the dead" (Turner, 1967: 74) and "Whiteness expresses the generosity of the dominant partner and […] the gratitude of the subordinate." (Turner: 75) without citing the ritual context in which they occur. Examples can easily be multiplied: "Water is regarded as 'white' because […] washing

---

15 Sperber perceives of semiology as an ethnocentric ideology: the view that the *others'* objects, gestures, etc. carry interpretable messages is a mere assumption, a generalization from the anthropologist's own culture lacking justification. (Sperber, 1975: 83-4) However, Sperber argues from a realist point of view according to which symbols – if they exist – need be discovered *a posteriori*. A more pragmatic point of view (as will be demonstrated below) would enable talk of symbols as carrying interpretable messages given that the concept proves promotive for the scientific aim in question. For readers interested in the realist-pragmatist discussion, Patrick Baert (2005) is recommended.

symbolizes the removal of impurities" and "[r]ed [...] stands for killing up and cutting animals."(ibid: 78) Now, if symbols only admit meaning in rituals, then it is quite confusing to speak of general meanings in such a way. There is no question that Turner considers general meanings as he gives examples of Ndembu idioms alluding to symbolization outside ritual contexts. For instance, he writes, "I have heard an African storekeeper expostulate, when he was accused by his employer of embezzlement, 'My liver is white,' much as an Englishman would say, 'My conscience is clear.'" (ibid: 76) Here is a case of whiteness symbolizing innocence outside of a ritual context: symbols – contrary to Turner's theory – seem to have meaning outside of rituals. Indeed, were this not the case, Turner's analysis of symbolization would be circular as it presupposes a fixed ritual context where *ritual*, as noted, is defined in terms of symbols in the first place. Consequently, if symbols are thought to gain meaning only in ritual contexts, there would not have been any ritual context to start with.

One possible solution is that symbols are imported from a practical or everyday domain, to a ritual context (Munn, 1973: 586). The fact that blackness symbolizes sexual passion in the context of *N'kanga,* where older women, during seclusion, "take the sooty black bark of certain trees […] and blacken the novice's vulva", suggests such an interpretation since women with particularly black skin are generally desirable as mistresses (ibid: 73). Nevertheless, seeing as colors take on wildly different significata in different rituals – as noted above, red symbolizes both good and ill depending on the ritual – whereas the kind of general associations postulated by Turner are univocal, this principle is not generalizable. Ergo, apart from being contradictory, Turner's theory of symbolization does not account for the use of symbols outside of ritual contexts necessary for his theory to be non-circular.

2.3 Concluding Remarks

The aforementioned reproduction of Geertz and Turner's positions and their respective deficiencies resulted in the deduction of three criteria – the criterion of distinguishability, evaluation, and closure – that need be respected by any theory of symbolization. As demonstrated in section 2.1.1, Geertz violates the criteria of distinguishability and evaluation. It can now be demonstrated that the triadic meaning relation between a symbol, the emic conception of that symbol and, lastly, the anthropologist's interpretation of the former –

abbreviated "{{symbol, emic conception}, interpretation}" – spawned by Geertz's double hermeneutic, even if it, with Sperber, recognizes the necessity of treating exegesis as itself symbolic, does not satisfy the criterion of closure. On Geertz's view, the gap between symbol and interpretation requires two bridges: the first – between {symbol, emic conception} – erected by the informant in a culturally specific manner and the second – between {{symbol, emic conception} interpretation} – hypothetically construed by the anthropologist to the effect of probing the informant's conception of his/her own culture; to deconstruct the first bridge, as it were. According to Geertz, the type of relation holding between a certain symbol and its emic conception is inferred from the overarching web of symbolic configurations composing the culture under scrutiny. As noted in section 2.1.1, the decoding-relation Geertz's deems operative in the Balinese case is non-generalizable since it illegitimately excludes actions and statements occurring in shallow play, as well as the practice of grooming one's rooster. Generally, the circumstances under which the rooster is deemed symbolic are unclear and postulated *ad hoc*.

As Sperber notes, Turner's account is similarly flawed as it does not satisfy the criterion of closure*:* the set of interpretations paired with a given symbol is undefined and ostensibly wide open. By the same token, Turner does not respect the criterion of distinguishability. Seeing as the promising path of the ritual proved misleading, a proper mechanism for determining whether a statement or action is symbolic or practical is left wanting. Lastly, it is unclear how Turner's theory handles two contradicting interpretations of a distinct symbolic statement or action. Suggestively, given the prominence of ritual context in Turner's theory, a possible operation for solving such conflicts might be given with reference to the aim of the ritual containing the symbolic statement or action. However, such a mechanism, if general, would further confuse Turner's already rather blurry distinction between instrumental and dominant symbols (see footnote 11). Therefore, the question whether or not Turner implicitly satisfies the criterion of evaluation remains somewhat open. Note, however, that a theory satisfying the criterion of evaluation is of limited use if it, like Turner's, disrespects the criterion of distinguishability.

3 Toward a Specific Theory of Symbolization

The first part of this paper demonstrates the difficulty of giving a general theory of symbolization: the range of social phenomena that need be subsumed under the same theoretical construct is plainly too vast. One ends up with a theory so general that either everything is symbolic or a symbol arbitrarily symbolizes everything – with a disorganized taxonomy rather than a means for understanding.

A possible remedy, nonetheless preserving the spirit of interpretative and symbolic anthropology, can be sought in the development of *specific* theories of symbolization(s). Instead of treating every social phenomenon as an instance of a universal mode of symbolization, it might prove fruitful to consider a plurality of symbolic logics, each aimed at understanding a specific social phenomenon. The determiner *specific* is here applied to a theory that somehow limits the scope of either the *X*-, *Y*- or *C*-term of the general formula in such a way that the resulting sets are subsets of the wider sets contained in Geertz's definition of the general formula.[16] Note, however, that the enterprise of defining the relation *symbolizes* need not pay similar homage to the predecessors. Thus, the analytical footwork of Geertz's is retraced in such a way that one trips around the problematic aspects of his theory. Moreover, following Cohen's tenet that classification of symbols "depends on the nature of the problem being investigated and on the variables that are considered in the study" (1974: 25), a specific theory is explicitly aimed at clarifying one kind of social phenomenon. A theory along these lines simplifies the formulation of mechanisms satisfying the distinguishability, evaluation and closure criteria. This tendency is present in Turner's account as he considers ritual symbols specifically; however, his theory seemingly ranges over non-ritual symbolization as well. A more promising attempt is made by Stanley J. Tambiah, whose writing – focusing on the specific problem of ritual efficacy – to a greater extent realizes the ambition of developing a specific theory of ritual symbolization.

---

16 This is the Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss's characterization of *specification*, according to which formulation *U* is a specification of formulation *T* if and only if it is the case that every reasonable interpretation of *U* is a reasonable interpretation of *T,* but not the opposite (Föllesdal et al., 2001: 285-6).

The remainder of this paper is dedicated to the presentation and subsequent articulation of Tambiah's account to the effect of sketching *one* possible notion of symbolization, specifically aimed at investigating the relation between a certain kind of power and symbolic usage in a ritual context. Note that this attempt is mainly forwarded in order to investigate whether an alternative, pragmatically motivated, path is possible, and is at best a heuristic for theorizing around the (alleged) relation in question. A first step towards this end is taken in concert with the linguistic philosopher J. L. Austin and anthropologist Alfred Gell, whose respective conceptual apparatuses clarify Tambiah's account.

3.1 Stanley J. Tambiah: Breaking the Fourth Wall

In the introduction to his collection of articles *Culture, Thought and Action* (1985), Tambiah reveals that one of his aspirations is to unite a semantic and pragmatic analysis of ritual: a unity between, on the one hand, Saussurean structural analysis and, on the other hand, approaches centered around actual symbol usage (Tambiah, 1985: 1). The first mode of analysis is directed at the syntagmatic features of rituals whereas the second mode is aimed at understanding how rituals can be "task-oriented and power/prestige-conferring enactments" that extend beyond the ritual in question (ibid: 2), in other words; how the ritual scene leaks into everyday life. The emphasis of the subsequent discussion is on this pragmatic element of Tambiah's theory.

Departing from the idea that rituals are complexes of words (e.g., spells, prayers, songs) and actions (e.g., object manipulation), Tambiah embarks on an investigation into the factors enabling ritual efficacy (ibid: 17). Instead of treating words and actions as autonomous structures, their interconnectedness is elucidated for the purpose of rendering ritual – and ultimately, emic thought – rational in its own right. Even though Tambiah never explicitly addresses symbols as such, his account of ritual acts nonetheless furnishes an implicit discussion of the subject as *ritual* – in line with Geertz and Turner – is defined as "a culturally constructed system of *symbolic communication* […] constituted of patterned and ordered sequences of words and acts [italics added]". Of the various ways, postulated by Tambiah, in which a ritual is performative, two are relevant for the present purposes: Firstly, a ritual is performative in Austin's sense, wherein "saying something is also doing something as a conventional act".

Secondly, a ritual involves indexical symbols, the values of which are inferred by the participants (ibid: 128).

3.1.1 Symbolic acts as performatives

The first concept of ritual performativity (Austin's variant) is initially developed as a contribution to the mentality debate – the debate over whether traditional or pre-scientific modes of thought qualitatively differ from modern and science-oriented reason. Pleading the universality of an analogical mode of thought and, in the same stroke, contesting the universality of causal reasoning, Tambiah rejects such a difference. Be that as it may – it is the answer, rather than its contribution to the mentality debate, which interests us.

Initially, ritual acts are said to be acts "by which a property is imperatively transferred to a recipient object or person on an analogical basis." (Tambiah, 1985: 60) The kind of analogy involved in rituals is labeled *persuasive* and primarily serves the purposes of conceptualization and expansion of meaning.[17] Tambiah gives the following pedagogical example:

Father	:	Employer
Children	:	Workers

In this example, "Father" and "Employer" are analogous (denoted ":") in so far as they stand in a similar relation to their respective vertical pairing term. By the same token, "Children" and "Workers" are analogous. Importantly, there is a divergence between the two vertical relations: children generally love their father whilst workers usually harbor no such feelings toward their employer (Tambiah, 1985: 71). Analogies, being both positive and negative, function as transferring some value from a term of the one pair to the analogous term in the other pair. In Tambiah's words: "two objects are seen as having resemblance and difference, and an attempt is made to transfer the desirable quality of one to the other, which is in a defective state" (ibid: 80). Tambiah argues that a "rite consists in persuasively transferring the properties of the desired and desirable vertical relation to the other which is in an undesirable condition." Such transference is accomplished by bringing the object inhabiting the desirable position into contact with the object

---

17 Henceforth, *persuasive analogy* is simply abbreviated *analogy*.

inhabiting the undesirable position.[18] In our example, this would (quite awkwardly) entail bringing a child into contact with a worker in order to transfer the value of "love towards your superior". Analogical reasoning and action, then, impose a certain desirable relation between entities previously lacking the relation in question. Furthermore, the alleged effect of the operation is stated verbally, in tandem with the manipulation of the objects (ibid: 72). Sticking to our example, this would (touching the absurd) mean exclaiming "may the worker love the employer as the child loves the father" as one brings the child in contact with the worker. Now, instead of analyzing the relation between the verbal and nonverbal actions involved in rituals in terms of causality (i.e. by hypothesizing that the act *causes* the worker to internalize the property in question), Tambiah invokes Austin's speech act theory in arguing that they are different aspects of a performative speech act. In order to grasp this, some aspects of Austin's theory is reviewed.

Speech act theory aims at explaining linguistic meaning in terms of language use. In this view, language is foremost a form of behavior or a system of action. When an utterer produces a sentence, the meaning of the sentence is not purely – as the positivists had it – its truth conditions (i.e. whether or not it is an adequate expression of an ostensively available fact), but rather a complex of operations regarding its use in a certain context.[19] Austin's account involves a rich flora of different kinds of speech acts. Every utterance is a speech act, albeit of various sorts depending on what kind of action is being performed by it. "I apologize" and "I promise" are thus different kinds of speech acts since they perform different actions (Austin, 1955: 151). The kind of speech act that Tambiah alludes to is the *performative*, a kind of utterance which looks like a statement and yet is neither true nor false. For instance, by declaring "I name this ship 'the Queen Elizabeth'", the agent *performs* rather than describes the christening of the ship (ibid: 6). The same goes for statements such as "I promise" and "I hereby pronounce you husband and wife" – the latter uttered by a priest during a wedding ceremony. Moreover, performatives are governed by *constitutive rules* which need to be followed in order for the performative to be successful. A set of rules is constitutive if it serves as a precondition for the practice it purports

---

18 Henceforth, a property sought to be transferred by exploiting some analogy in a ritual context is abbreviated *desirable property*.

19 On this level of analysis, the terms *sentence* and *utterance* are used coextensively. Furthermore, these are not necessarily spoken but can be communicated through text or other media of communication.

to regulate; "[c]onstitutive rules constitute (and also regulate) an activity the existence of which is logically dependent on the rules."(Searle, 1969: 34). A popular example of a set of constitutive rules is the game of chess, which is possible only in force of a set of rules defining valid moves; "[t]he rules of football or chess, for example, do not merely regulate playing football or chess, but as it were they create the very possibility of playing such games." (ibid: 33).[20] The performative "I promise" is thus unsuccessful if the utterer does not intend to keep the promise because such an intention is, according to Austin, part of the set of constitutive rules enabling the act of promising in the first place. By a similar token, the utterance "I hereby pronounce you husband and wife" is unsuccessful if the utterer is not a priest. Were this not the case, agents would be able to arbitrarily christen and marry each other just by uttering a particular phrase.

Since Tambiah leans quite excessively on Austin's tripartite analysis of speech acts, a condensed version of it is stated: Austin cuts the speech act into three acts, each performed in concert but nonetheless analytically separable. The *locutionary* act is the words uttered and their literal meaning; "[t]he act of 'saying something' in […] full normal sense" (Austin, 1955: 94), for example, plainly making a meteorological prediction by stating "a storm is coming". The *illocutionary* act is the performance executed by the utterance, the forces that attach to the locutionary act. Thus, "a storm is coming" can have the illocutionary force of a warning or a promise, which is something different from the proposition used to utter the warning or the promise. As noted, the illocutionary force determines what kind of speech act is performed. The *perlocutionary* act, in turn, is the "consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience, or of the speaker, or of other persons" (ibid: 101). For instance, the hearer might become frightened by the warning. Importantly, illocutionary acts are conventional in the sense that their force is predictable, whilst perlocutionary effects are nonconventional as they may take on various forms under differing circumstances (ibid: 121-122).

Now, according to Tambiah, ritual acts – both verbal and nonverbal – are illocutionary acts or performatives "which simply by virtue of being enacted (under the appropriate conditions) achieve a change of state, or do something effective." (Tambiah, 1985: 79) Thus,

---

20 The constitutive rule can be further clarified by comparison to the *regulative* rule. Regulative rules "regulate a pre-existing activity, an activity whose existence is logically independent of the rules." (Searle, 1969: 34). One can think of regulative rules as imperatives such as *drive on the right side of the road*. Constitutive rules are not just normative in this sense, they are forcing.

rituals are effective since analogical reasoning manifests itself in some agent's employment of illocutionary force: by uttering the wished effect of bringing the object in a desirable position (returning to the peculiar example: the child) in contact with the object in an undesirable position (the worker) simultaneously as one executes the action, the value sought is actually transferred. Similarly, the nonverbal action is also an illocutionary act or performative; "the action consists of an operation done on an object-symbol to make an imperative and realistic transfer of its properties to the recipient." These verbal and nonverbal aspects, analyzed as illocutionary acts, together constitute a ritual act (ibid: 80).

Lastly, Tambiah explicitly characterizes rituals such as "the installation of a Tallensi chief, Ndembu circumcision rites [and] Lodagaa mortuary rites" as sets of constitutive rules "whose very performance achieves the realization of the *performative* effect". Such constitutively regulated rituals may or may not imply a set of perlocutionary effects. In some cases, the perlocutionary effects are presupposed by the illocutionary force; "when a Tallensi chief is properly installed certain results must imperatively follow upon his exercise of the powers of office." In other cases, no such effects are presupposed – indeed, this is the case in every curative ritual where the patient's recovery (the alleged perlocutionary effect) is left wanting (ibid: 135). Moreover, if the ritual is adduced to provide "an anticipatory statement about the success to be achieved" in the subsequent practical activity (Tambiah exemplifies with Kula canoe-building), it is, according to Tambiah, a *regulative* ritual; it somehow regulates the subsequent activity (see footnote 20 for the regulative-constitutive distinction) (ibid: 136). Thus, on Tambiah's account, rituals might be regulative or constitutively regulated.

3.1.2 Symbols as social agents

Speech act theory does not exhaust the ways in which a ritual is performative. Querying over the role of the ritual in the maintenance of status and power structures, Tambiah introduces the notion *indexical symbol*. Such a symbol plays the dual role of *representing* the object signified and *indexing* wider cosmological notions:

> [T]he concepts of indexical symbol and indexical icon are useful for showing how important parts of a
> ritual enactment have a symbolic or iconic meaning associated with the *cosmological plane of content*,

and at the same time how those same parts are […] *indexically related to participants* in the ritual,
creating, affirming, or legitimating their social positions and powers [italics added]. (Tambiah, 1985:
156)

Indexical symbols are, according to Tambiah, related to the entities indexed by a conventional
semantic rule. Accordingly, the meaning of the indexical symbol is inferred by the participants of
the ritual with reference to such semantic conventions together with "contextual features and
certain communicational understandings" (Tambiah, 1985: 156). In this view, then, an indexical
symbol – regardless of its usage – refers to some entity solely in virtue of being related to it by
some conventional sematic rule. Since Tambiah's discussion of the indexical symbol is rather
superficial, it is useful to compensate with Gell's fastidious take on the same topic. Gell shows
that accounts of indexicality such as Tambiah's are fallacious for at least two reasons: they treat
symbolic communication as a semantically closed system a lá Geertz and they neglect the use
aspect of symbolic meaning.

The first two chapters of the book *Art and Agency* (1998) contain the outline of Gell's
theory of social agency.[21] This theory expands the kind of agency traditionally ascribed to
humans – the ability to initiate causal sequences by intention or will alone – so that it indirectly
ranges over physical objects (Gell, 1998: 7). Gell defines *social agents* as "those persons (and
things, see below) who/which are seen as *initiating* causal sequences of […] events caused by
acts of mind or will or intention [italics added]." (ibid: 16).[22] Such a merging of person and
object is possible given Gell's functional definition of agency; however, the concepts of *primary*
and *secondary* agents need first be clarified. The former denotes "intentional beings" such as
humans capable of initiating causal sequences by mind or will alone, whereas the latter refers to
non-intentional beings such as objects able to mediate causal sequences initiated by some
primary agent. Now, agency is a property of social contexts (rather than of isolated entities) in
which the secondary agent mediates the agency of some primary agent; "the [object] is an

---

21 It should be mentioned that *Art and Agency* was published posthumously and that, consequently, the ideas it
contains might not be fully developed.

22 A charitable interpretation of "initiating" as meaning "initiating or mediating" is done in order for Gell's account
to be coherent. Obviously, non-intentional entities cannot initiate casual sequences by mind or will alone.

emanation or manifestation of agency […] a mirror, vehicle, or channel of agency." (ibid: 20) A secondary or primary agent has agency relative to a *patient*:

An agent *a* has agency only relative to a patient *p* when *p* is causally affected by *a's* actions (ibid: 22).

Thus, which entities take the roles of agent and patient is a question of which/whom causally affect which/whom; "in any given transaction in which agency is manifested, there is a 'patient' who or which is *another 'potential' agent,* capable of acting as an agent or being a locus of agency [italics original]." (ibid: 22) As noted, at least one of the relata need be a primary agent: If I (primary agent) ascribe agency to my car (secondary agent) and it breaks down, I am a patient since I am affected by its actions – even though they are not intended *per se*. Thus, the agency of objects is by necessity indirect and contingent upon a primary agent; "objectification in artefact-form is how social agency manifests and realizes itself, via the proliferation of fragments of 'primary' intentional agents in their 'secondary' artefactual forms." (ibid: 21)

Gell employs the notion of the indexical symbol to further elucidate the relation between primary and secondary agent. An indexical symbol is, on Gell's specification, an entity from which the observer can make abductions about the intentions or capabilities of some primary agent – not about some cosmological notion, as Tambiah has it.[23] For instance, a smile is an index for friendliness since an observer can make the following abduction: *if it is friendly, then it smiles; it smiles; therefore, it is friendly* (ibid: 13). Even though the abduction is a logically unsound mode of inference (a smile can indicate more than friendliness) it nonetheless constitutes a way of hypothesizing about the meanings of things of which knowledge is incomplete. In this view, meaning is a function of actions rather than of abstract relations between symbol and signifier. Indeed, this is, according to Gell, what distinguishes the institution of language from social reality; linguistic meaning is fixed by convention and tautological, thus allowing logically sound modes of inference. Were social reality essentially a Geertzian text, one would be able to deduce intentions (e.g. friendliness) from indexes (e.g. a smile) by necessity (ibid: 14-15). Since this is impossible, Gell can be read as a further critique

---

23 An abduction is a mode of inference where one concludes "*A*" from the premises "if *A*, then *B*" and "*B*" where *A* and *B* are propositions.

of Geertz's theory of symbolization as well as of Tambiah's aforementioned treatment of indexical symbols.

To lead Gell into conclusion: Objects are indexes of the agency ascribed to them by primary agents. For example, a stone shaped as a hand axe might be an index of "its maker and of the man who used it." (ibid: 16) Accordingly, notions of the *other*, object or person, is formed by a process of abduction from indexes. Gell's model of indexical symbols is preferable over Tambiah's for at least two reasons: First, it shows that a theory of symbolization, instead of being a theory of communication, can be a theory of action as symbols are meaningful in so far as their manipulation alters states of affairs. Second, it circumvents the onus of explaining how symbols can refer in the abstract, by themselves. In a wider sense, Gell's theory echoes Turner's as it is forwarded as a means for understanding actual emic beliefs by focusing on culturally specific processes of abductions – a feature that (as will be demonstrated below) inherits Turner's difficulties.

3.1.3 Summary

On Tambiah's account, ritual acts – verbal or nonverbal – are instances of symbolic communication. The vehicles of such communication are, on the one hand, objects exhibiting some desirable property and, on the other hand, symbolic utterances regarding the former. Symbolic utterances are related to objects by articulating the analogical reasoning behind the ritual act involving the object in question (to reiterate: a ritual act is a complex of object manipulation and utterance). By bringing the object in contact with the recipient of the ritual, together with verbally citing the analogical reasoning behind the act, the desirable properties are transferred to the recipient. This, in turn, is possible since ritual acts are performative in two different senses. Firstly, they are conceived as illocutionary acts or performatives altering states of affairs in themselves. In this view, rituals are sets of either constitutive rules as they exist solely in virtue of the rules regulating them, or regulative rules, as they regulate some ensuing practical activity. Secondly, objects are indexes of agency and thus act upon the recipient (or in Gell's vocabulary: the patient) of the ritual simply on the basis of him/her abducting the intensions and capabilities of the primary agent in question. For the sake of clarity, a use-clause

involving the set *A* of primary agents and a lower-case variable *x* are added to the general formula:

$$A \text{ uses } x \text{ to symbolize } Y \text{ in } C$$

3.1.4 Evaluation

Tambiah's account allows three possible interpretations of the general formula: one in terms of speech act theory, one in terms of indexes and a reconciliation of the two. According to the speech act interpretation, *x* is an object figuring in some analogy, *Y* is a desirable property and *C* is a certain kind of ritual.[24] Agent *a*'s act, then, is symbolic if *a* exploits an analogy containing *x* to the effect of transferring *Y* to some recipient. In other words, *a* enacts a speech act carrying the illocutionary force of transferring *Y* to a recipient, who actually obtains *Y* as a result of the operation.

According to the interpretation in terms of indexes, *a* is a primary agent, *x* is an object, *Y* is an index of *a*'s intentions and *C* is a certain kind of ritual. On this interpretation, *a*'s act is symbolic if the secondary agent *x* exercises causal powers over some patient solely in virtue of the fact that the patient abducts *a*'s intensions from the object in question together with the analogical action.

Interpreting the formula in light of both senses of performativity postulated by Tambiah yields some awkward results; however, since it involves an element of abduction similar to the aforementioned interpretation, it need not detain us. The chief reason behind this is that accounts of symbolic meaning alluding to some patient's abduction of some primary agent's intentions from an object do not satisfy the criterion of closure. Such accounts fail in the same way as Turner's; abductions are, rather than decoding devices, *motivations* for fixed interpretations, themselves in need of interpretation. Recollect Sperber's contentions that meaning is a relation

---

24 This definition appears circular since Tambiah defines *ritual* in terms of symbolization in the first place (see section 3.1). Tambiah's definition of the *C*-term is thus problematic. However, there are other defining characteristics of rituals; for instance, it involves rules governing who is allowed to conduct them and to whom it may be directed. Accordingly, and positively controversially, *ritual* could be defined as a set of enabling conditions for successful conduction of symbolic action. This view is elaborated upon in section 3.3.

between a closed {message, interpretation} pair and the principle through which the interpretation decodes the symbol must be generalizable and univocal. Now, the pairs resulting from accounts involving indexes take the shape {object, intention} and are decoded by means of abduction. As Gell himself points out, the abductive mode of inference is logically unsound, and thus un-generalizable: it is a function of the patient's *ad hoc* reasoning connecting the object to the intentions of some primary agent. Subsequently, the abduction is a motivation for deeming a particular intension indexed by a particular object, itself in need of interpretation. The object symbolizes a certain intension *because* of a certain arbitrary abduction process (see page 25 for the generic structure of motivations). This begs the question of why *this* intension and not *that* got abducted from the object (or index) in question – why did the patient abduct friendliness from a smile rather than some other intension? The speech act interpretation, on the other hand, implies the pair {object manipulation, speech act} where the speech act (interpretation) provides a generalizable and univocal principle for decoding the symbol manipulation in question (message).

According to the speech act variant of Tambiah's account, an act is symbolic if it has the illocutionary force of transferring some desirable property of an object onto a ritual recipient by means of exploiting some analogy. Seemingly, the criterion of distinguishability is respected. However, Tambiah writes that the sought after transference allegedly effected by the ritual speech act may or may not occur: "there are constitutive acts which […] may yet be uncertain of realizing their expected perlocutionary effects. A classic example is curing rituals in cases of spirit possession, which […] may or may not induce a cure in the patient." (Tambiah, 1985: 135) Since the desirable property may fail to be transferred, it follows that a symbolic act not necessarily needs to yield its purported effects – the ritual recipient has been subjected to a symbolic act even if he/she does not get cured. Hence, the mechanism for demarcating symbolic acts from practical ones cannot make reference to a predictable illocutionary force. This being said, Tambiah's account still satisfies the criterion of distinguishability, albeit less forcefully than at first sight.

On the other hand, this vagueness seems to complicate the formulation of a proper mechanism for evaluating two or more contesting interpretations of a symbolic act since such a mechanism cannot be erected with reference to the actual functions – e.g., if the ritual recipient enjoys some new status – of the ritual speech act. Even though the alleged effect is explicitly

stated in tandem with the non-verbal manipulation of the object with the desirable property, it is impossible to know what the statement voicing the analogical reasoning means if the effects of the ritual is left wanting: investigation into the actual effects of the ritual speech act is a way of deducing the meaning of the analogical reasoning. Consequently, the criterion of evaluation seems to be disrespected.

Fortunately, this latter problem is not due to speech act theory as such, but to Tambiah's, somewhat confused interpretation of it. Firstly, throughout his account, Tambiah uses the expression "'illocutionary' or 'perforamtive'" to denote the aspect rendering rituals effective, thus suggesting synonymy. However, the two concepts belong to analytically different categories: a performative is a *kind of* speech act, whereas the illocutionary force is an *aspect of* a speech act. Furthermore, since every speech act is a perforamtive, the notion is, by its comprehensiveness, not very fruitful. Secondly, illocutionary force is confused with perlocutionary effect: the actions of the Tallensi chief (see page 35) are not perlocutionary effects of the ritual speech act putting him in charge; rather, they are speech acts in their own right. The results that "*must* imperatively follow [italics added]" (Tambiah, 1985: 135) from the Tallensi installation rite are, opposite to the subsequent actions of the chief, conventional and thus part of the illocutionary force. Tambiah's opaque handling of this distinction makes statements such as "there are [...] constitutive acts which, although they realize their performative dimension, may yet be uncertain of realizing their *expected* perlocutionary effects [italics added]" (1985: 135) rather cryptic; the perlocutionary effects are, *on Tambiah's account*, part of the performative dimension. This confusion is the reason why Tambiah's account disrespects the criterion of evaluation. Thirdly, the demarcation between a constitutive and a regulative ritual is potentially shady. Tambiah ascribes the property of being regulated to the technical activity following the ritual and not to the ritual itself. The fact that a preceding ritual regulates some posterior activity does not render the ritual itself regulative: a football game can regulate the activity of betting without itself being less constitutively regulated. Thus, since the argument is unsound, we have no reason to question the exclusively constitutive nature of the rules composing rituals.

For these reasons, a clarification of Tambiah's account is motivated. This can be achieved by considering the ideas developed by the philosopher John R. Searle. Such a move is natural since Searle, as the protégé of Austin's, developed the speech act theory substantially and

in directions conducive for the present purposes. Importantly, Searle introduces the concept of a *declarative* speech act as an explication of the perforamtive speech act. It will be demonstrated that this notion is superior to Tambiah's "illocutionary or perforamtive" as it provides a more stringent model for understanding analogical reasoning. Moreover, an articulation of Tambiah's account in terms of Searle's declarative speech act, apart from aiding the understanding of ritual efficacy at large, might answer Tambiah's question regarding the role of ritual or symbolic acts in maintaining status and power structures in a more satisfactory way than the analysis in terms of indexical symbols does. Truly, this is the very question posed by the prologue.

3.2 John R. Searle: Conceptualizing Mauss's Enigma

Searle's overarching project is the sketching of a philosophy both for and of the nature of human society, dealing with questions such as, "What is the mode of existence of social entities such as governments, families, cocktail parties […] and passports?" (Searle, 2010: 5). Coming from a philosophical tradition primarily focused on the logical analysis of natural language, Searle's point of departure is statements of the form "We (I) hereby declare that such-and-such is the case" and their ontological consequences. The conclusion is that all of institutional reality, including rituals, is created and maintained by one fundamental linguistic mechanism: the declarative speech act. However, to avoid jumping to conclusions, the relevant aspects of Searle's philosophy are first presented.

3.2.1 Status functions and deontic power

The faculty demarcating human from non-human is according to Searle the capacity to "impose functions on objects and people where the objects and the people cannot perform the functions solely in virtue of their physical structure." Such functions are labeled *status functions* and require collective recognition in order to be performed. The full definition of a status function is:

> [A] function that is performed by an object(s), person(s), or other sort of entity(ies) and which can
> only be performed in virtue of the fact that the community in which the function is performed assigns

a certain status to the object, person or entity in question, and the function is performed in virtue of the collective […] recognition of the object, person, or entity as having that status. (Searle, 2010: 94)

The paradigm example of a status function is the value of a twenty dollar bill. This value is not deducible from sheer physical properties; instead, it is a product of collective intentionality or intersubjectivity (Searle, 2010: 7). A more anthropologically minded example of a status function is the function of a Maussian gift imposed on some initially neutral object – there is nothing about the plainly physical properties of an object that grants it the status of a gift.

Status functions carry *deontic powers*, a rather vague concept ranging over relational entities such as rights, duties, obligations, permissions and so on. For example, Barack Obama has a certain set of duties in virtue of his status as president. In virtue of their relation to deontic powers, status functions creates *desire-independent* reasons for action, defined by Searle as a vague set of reasons such as obligations, duties and rights untraceable to some desire or inclination of the agent; "to recognize something as a right, duty, obligation, requirement and so on is to recognize a reason for action." (Searle, 2006a: 19). As demonstrated in the prologue, whereas fear is a desire-dependent reason for reciprocating a gift in Northwest American potlatch, the status function of the Polynesian gift provides a desire-independent reason – an obligation – to reciprocate. Note that one can have desire independent and desire dependent reasons for action simultaneously. Undoubtedly, this is the case in Polynesian gift exchange where receiving a gift might motivate a desire-*dependent* reason for reciprocating, namely the desire to maintain alliances. Nonetheless, even if one has such a desire-dependent reason, the obligation to reciprocate is *itself* a reason independent from that desire. Interestingly enough, in the Polynesian case, the desire to maintain alliances resembles a perlocutionary effect of giving.

3.2.2 Declarative speech acts

To unpack the notion of the declarative speech act, Searle introduces the concept of *direction of fit*. The direction of fit is the mode in which the speech act relates to reality. Speech acts purporting to represent a particular state of affairs, for instance "The cat is on the mat", have a *downward direction of fit* since their truth is a function of the degree to which they actually represent the state of affairs in question – the fact that there is a cat on the mat. Searle confesses

that he thinks "of these speech acts as hovering over the world and pointing down at it, as fitting or failing to fit the world, as having […] the word-to-world direction of fit [i.e. a downward direction of fit]." (2010: 11) Conversely, some speech acts have the *upward direction of fit*, or the world-to-word direction of fit. These are performatives such as ordering and promising whose point "is to get the world to change to match the content of the speech act." For example, when an agent utters "I promise to give you the book tomorrow", the speech act aims at causing fulfillment rather than adequately representing a state of affairs.

Now, declarations are speech acts enjoying both directions of fit simultaneously, "[t]hey change the world by declaring that a state of affairs exists and thus bringing that state of affairs into existence." These are speech acts achieving upward direction of fit by altering reality to match their content, but do so in virtue of representing reality as being so changed, and in the same stroke achieving the downward direction of fit. For instance, by uttering "I hereby pronounce you husband and wife" the priest alters reality so that it comply with the content of his speech act (upward direction of fit), but this is possible only in virtue of him representing reality thus altered (downward direction of fit) – the priest imposes a status function by explicitly saying that it is the case (Searle, 2010: 12). Likewise, the donor's act of giving a gift alters some state of affairs by imposing a power relation between him/herself and the receiver just by – in the act of giving – representing the state of affairs that one is donor and one is receiver. This analysis is a essentially a paraphrase of Nancy Munn's contention that symbolic transaction conducted during rituals carries a social message in enforcing relationships between agents; "we might say that this social message is co-implied by the symbol vehicles, since in any particular instance the relevant relationship is demonstrated *by the transaction itself* [italics added]." (Munn, 1973: 581). Furthermore, a set of constitutive rules need be satisfied in order for the gift exchange to count as such. Returning to Polynesian gift exchange, the object exchanged must be *taonga*. The set of declarative speech acts is, then, a subset of the wider set of Austin's performative speech acts outlined above: all declaratives are performatives but not all performatives are declaratives. For instance, the act of promising is a performative but because it lacks a downward direction of fit, it is not a declarative. Consequently, the declarative is a specification of the performative.

The notions of status function and deontic power can now quasi-formally be related to that of the declarative speech act:

> We (or I) make it the case by declaration that a Y status function exists in C and in so doing we (or I)
>
> create a relation R between Y and a certain person or persons, S, such that in virtue of [Y being related
>
> to S], S has the power to perform acts (of type) A (Searle, 2010: 101-2).

Since we never quite left Polynesia: Let *Y* be a gift, let *S* denote the set of donors and let *A* denote the kind of act imposing obligations; then, the formula reads, "We (or I) make it the case by declaration that the status function of a gift exists in Polynesian gift exchange and in so doing we (or I) create a relation between the gift and a specific donor such that in virtue of this donor's relation to the status of the gift, this donor has the power to impose obligations." (Searle, 2010: 101-2) The collective recognition ranges over both ascription of status functions and the implied deontic power relations subjecting people to desire independent reasons for action. Hence, deontic power relations between agents might be legitimized *a fortiori* by the continued use of the vocabulary corresponding to the institution generating them. By this device, deontic power relations are inherent in some vocabularies; ordinary talk of gifts legitimizes deontic power relations between agents related to that very status function (ibid: 104).

3.2.3 Standing declarations

Having defined the declarative, Searle relates it to the constitutive rule by claiming that such rules are instances of a kind of latent speech act labeled a *standing declaration.* This declaration is *standing* because it is a conditional claiming that "*if* there is an *x* that satisfies *P*, *then* that *x* counts as *Y*". Expressed differently: the standing declaration "makes it the case into the indefinite future" that every *x* satisfying *P* counts as *Y* where *x* denotes a physical or neutral entity (e.g. a shell), *Y* refers to a status function (e.g. the status of gift) and *P* denotes a set of properties necessary for *x* in order to enjoy *Y* (e.g. that the thing satisfying *x* is *taonga*) (ibid: 97). Since recognition is implicit in the acceptance of constitutive rules or standing declarations, separate acts of recognition are superfluous (Searle, 2010: 13).[25] Thus, one need not explicitly accept the rules of Polynesian gift exchange to render them operative. The relation between the singular declaration and the standing declaration, then, is such that the former imposes status functions

---

25 The term *acceptance* does not involve approval; rather, "[a]cceptance [...] can range all the way from enthusiastic endorsement to grudging acquiescence." (Searle, 2010: 103-4)

whilst the latter presents the conditions for such imposing; the standing declaration need be collectively recognized in order for status functions to be imposed. For instance, in Polynesian gift exchange there are standing declarations stating the conditions under which two persons are engaged in gift exchange involving that the thing exchanged must be *taonga* and the exchange itself need be between such-and-such agents. Once the institution – e.g. of gift exchange – is created, the institutional facts it generates – e.g. new power relations – need not be recognized in any specific attitude since such facts are recognized *a fortiori* by the collective recognition of the institution itself. In other words: the institution "consists of sets of standing Declarations, and satisfying the conditions set down by these Declarations counts as constituting the institutional facts in question." (ibid: 102). Truly, institutions need not be maintained through continual utterances of explicit declarative speech acts of the type "I hereby declare this such-and-such", as noted, the maintenance of an institution is foremost marked by the continued use of the vocabulary and practice corresponding to that institution (ibid: 103). Along these lines, implicit declarative speech acts permeate all talk about gift exchange, husbands, wives, private property and money, reinforcing the corresponding institutions.

Before viewing Tambiah's account of ritual efficacy against the background of Searle's framework, Amie L. Thomasson's twofold critique of Searle's standing declaration is briefly reproduced and commented upon. Firstly, according to Thomasson, the extension of the *X*- or *x*-term is ambiguous: it can either be a set of things or a specific member of that set – *all* physical objects of a certain kind or *some* particular physical object of that kind. Even though the member-interpretation implies that if a specific twenty-dollar bill gets lost during print, it remains a simple piece of paper since no status function is ever imposed on it by some intentional beings, this is the interpretation accepted in the current paper (Thomasson, 2003: 274). Interpreting the *x*-term as ranging over a specific object yields no such absurdities on the account forwarded in the subsequent chapters since the ascription of a status function to an object satisfying the *x*-term need, in opposition to Searle, be explicit. The second problem with the Searlian standing declaration is that the status functions are assumed to be imposed on actual physical objects. Thomasson argues that this is not valid across the field. For instance, the status function of being a company is not imposed on some concrete object; rather, it is imposed on an entity in itself abstract (ibid: 273). Now, this fact does not concern us since the range of the *x*-

term is, on the account developed below, limited to only a physical object figuring in some analogy.

3.3 Tambiah Revisited: *P*-symbolization

Filtering Tambiah's account through Searle's conceptual apparatus amounts to a clarification of ritual efficacy. Rituals are performative since the ritual acts – verbal and nonverbal – are declarative in the aforementioned sense. This entails that the manipulation of objects enjoying some desirable property, together with the accompanying utterances stating the analogical reasoning, imposes status functions upon the recipient of the ritual act. Transferring a desirable property is, then, a matter of imposing a status function through something which can be stipulated as a *declarative ritual act*. This term denotes acts combining the verbal and nonverbal declarative acts involved in the transferences described above. Moreover, the status function carries a set of deontic powers. The relation between symbolic acts and the creation and maintenance of deontic power structures is now spelled out: singular declarative ritual acts enforce deontic power relations whereas standing declarations enable and, indirectly through the vocabulary corresponding to the institution, maintain such relations. In this view, a ritual is a set of constitutive rules or standing declarations – an institution, as it were – enabling singular declarative ritual acts. Subsequently, a declarative ritual act fails if the sought social relationship is not imposed. This variant of ritual failure is also recognized by Munn, who writes that "[r]ituals 'fail' when they no longer […] serve the participants as a means of transacting their relationships in social terms that contain 'intimations' of personal identity" (1973, 582). Thus, the circularity – defining *ritual* in terms of *symbolization* and symbolization in terms of ritual – exhibited in both Turner (see section 2.2.1) and Tambiah's (see footnote 24) accounts is circumvented by defining *ritual* as a set of enabling conditions for successful symbolization.

As hinted upon in the preceding section, it is necessary to slightly diverge from the Searlian standing declaration. Apart from being the enabling conditions, the standing declarations composing a ritual containing declarative ritual acts need involve explicit imposition of status functions; after all, it is the declarative ritual act that renders rituals effective. Consequently, at least some standing declaration operative in rituals will have to be formulated in the following vein: "if *x* figures in some analogy and is subjected to a ritual declarative act,

then that object is a means for transferring its properties to some recipient". The important point is that, contrary to the value of a twenty-dollar bill, the status functions involved in declarative ritual acts need be explicitly and separately imposed. On the other side, the set of standing declarations indirectly enabling the declarative ritual act – e.g., those stating who has the right to enact declarative ritual acts etc. – need not be explicitly enacted. This amounts to a specification of Tambiah's account, aimed at understanding the relation between symbolic acts and power structures. As a result, some social phenomena deemed ritualistic by Tambiah are excluded; for instance, curative rites whose curative effects are uncertain.

We are now in a position to formulate a working definition *D1* of the notion of symbolization related to that of deontic power, thus answering the questions initially posed by the prologue:[26]

D1   *A* uses *x* to *p*-symbolize *Y* in *C* if and only if: (1) *x* is a neutral object figuring in some analogy, (2) *Y* is a desirable property, (3) *C* is a ritual and (4) *A*'s manipulation of *x* is a declarative ritual act.

Where the *A*-term denotes the set of agents justified in conducting the declarative ritual act in question. This entails that *a*'s manipulation of some object *x* is a declarative ritual act exploiting some analogy in transferring a desirable property onto a recipient. In this view, the transferring of *Y* onto some recipient is specified as a status function imposition. Thus, the imposition of a desirable property on a recipient creates desire independent reasons for actions in the recipient in question: the recipient has some obligation, right, etc. which he/she did not have prior to the ritual act. Now, this reasoning is not alien to anthropologists. For example, Munn holds that "[r]itual symbols are testaments to the joining of individuals in objective relationships that have personal subjective relevance and internalized normative value" (1973: 582). Moreover, in line with *D1*, Cohen captures the symbolic aspect of power imposition; "[t]he ceremonials employed in [installation rites] are necessary not only to impress the audiences of ordinary people with the

---

26 To distinguish this notion from other kinds of symbolizations, expressions such as "*p*-symbolization", "*p*-symbol" and "*p*-symbolic" are used. Introducing different notions of symbolization(s) enables more precise analyses. Even though the question pertaining to the philosophical merits of such a move is slightly outside the scope of this paper, section 2 grants some *prima facie* justification for a plurality of notions of symbolization(s).

transformed nature of the incumbents of the positions of authority, but also to […] reassure the incumbents themselves of the reality of that transformation [italics added]" (1974: 78). Considered together, conditions (1) – (4) are one of the standing declarations enabling the subsequent enactments of singular ritual declarative acts.[27] The divergence from Searle's general account previously discussed is captured in condition (4), stating the necessity of an explicit declarative ritual act. On the other hand, auxiliary standing declarations need not be explicitly recognized by repetitively uttering the same singular declarative speech act; rather, they are accepted by the ensuing use of the corresponding vocabulary. In Cohen's words, "The functions of symbolic behavior are almost by definition unintended by the actors. When men in African Muslim polity gather in a congregation to pray on Friday, they do not say: Let us pray in order to consolidate the weakening position of the chief [...]" (1974: 53).[28]

3.3.1 Evaluation

---

27 Seeing as the standing declaration is an abstraction from singular declarative speech acts, the former is obviously logically prior to the latter. However, since Searle also holds that standing declarations are the enabling conditions for singular declaratives, the relationship between the two seems to be complex. Unfortunately, inquiries regarding their exact relation are outside the scope of the current discussion as they border the topic of social genesis. Therefore, the interested reader is referred to chapter four in Searle (2010) where the evolution of language is treated.

28 Note that *D1* is exclusively a means for labeling a specific set of social phenomena in such a way that their emically perceived interconnectedness is made lucid. Consequently, the ontological commitments resulting from the employment of *D1* must not exceed those made by the informants whose behavior it ranges over. One way of safeguarding against illegitimate ontological commitments is to demand of the sentence making ontological claims that it, in principle, has a meaningful emic correlate or paraphrase. Accordingly, expressions such as "obligation", "duty" and "right", implied by "status function" must in principle yield a meaningful paraphrase upon interpretation, ranging over the same set of social phenomena. Contrary to postulating Western notions inept (vide Martin Holbraad (2012)), *D1* is a heuristic for subsuming alleged regularities within human behavior under a univocal perspective. Indeed, the limit of anthropological representation is a controversial topic. For instance, surveying the current state of anthropological perspectives on knowledge, Malcolm R. Crick, presents the questions, "[c]an anthropological interpretation be valid if they imply meanings that actors do not know? What do anthropologists have to do to justify the interpretative framework they use?" as rather open (1982: 299).

D1 satisfies the criterion of distinguishability as an act has a *p*-symbolic dimension only if it has the illocutionary force of imposing a status function furnishing desire independent reasons for actions upon some agent. Granted, similar desire independent reasons for action stems from practical acts as well; nevertheless, the feature demarcating *p*-symbolic acts from merely practical ones is that the former involve analogical reasoning within a ritual context. Failing to exhibit some of these characteristics does not necessarily render the act practical; however, there is no reason to deem it an instance of *p*-symbolization. Methodologically, in the spirit of Mauss, one starts by observing the empirically salient consequences of deontic power relations: Who has obligations towards whom? Who has the right to do such-and-such? Why does he/she have that right? Answering such queries is equal to hypothesizing around the various possible standing declarations composing the ritual in question. Indeed, Searle advices us to ask, "[d]oes its existence imply deontic powers […]?" in order to isolate declarative acts (2010: 91). Importantly, illocutionary force is governed by convention and therefore subjected to regularities. Possible desire dependent reasons for action spawned by the declarative ritual act are, on the other hand, nonconventional and more alike to perlocutionary effects. Subsequently, if we assume *p*-symbolization as an analytic framework, our attention is directed at recurrent and empirically conspicuous phenomena such as object manipulation and the deontic power relations born in its wake; it is simply a heuristic for analyzing power ascription within ritual structures.

The criterion of closure is, in turn, respected since *D1* constitutes a generalizable and univocal principle – the declarative ritual act – for decoding the meaning of *p*-symbolic acts. In this view, the code (the bearer of meaning according to Sperber) consists in a closed set of {object manipulation, declarative ritual act} pairs where the ritual declarative act (interpretation), which is a sound decoding device, decodes the object manipulation in question (message).

Lastly, with regards to the criterion of evaluation, it is hard to conceive of a situation wherein we have two or more contradicting interpretations of an instance of *p*-symbolization. In the end, to say that an instance of *p*-symbolization is arbitrary is to say that one cannot discriminate between which of two or more possible status functions that is imposed through the declarative ritual act. Given that the kind of transformation achieved by the declarative ritual act – its illocutionary force – is explicitly stated upon enactment, and that the ritual recipient's changed status has empirically salient consequences, the criterion of evaluation is satisfied *a fortiori* by the mechanism satisfying the criterion of distinguishability.

3.3.2 An application

Much of Holbraad's book *Truth in Motion: The Recursive Anthropology of Cuban Divination* (2012) is dedicated to understanding the notion of truth employed by the professional diviners (*babalawos*) of the Ifá cult in Cuba. As practicing diviners, *babalawos* use oracles to, as they say "get to the truth of things" regarding their consultants' and their own lives (Holbraad, 2012: xvii). Contrary to the received view of truth-claims as simply depicting the world, the oracular truth-claims, or verdicts, are considered to actually *transform* the world. Consequently, they are conceived of as indubitably true (ibid: 55). Remarkably enough, these verdicts "entail forms of obligation that compel particular actions" (ibid: xix). Such authority is granted the *babalawos* in virtue of their ability to channel the will of *Orula*, "the wise deity of Ifá divination." (ibid: 5). According to Hoolbrad, making sense of oracular truth-claims requires challenging the consensus that "anthropology's attempt to make sense of other people must [...] take the form of providing appropriate representations […]" (ibid: xv). The alleged fallacy, then, is the doctrine of truth as representation, according to which a statement is true only if it adequately depicts a specific state of affairs; "[w]hatever it may be that [the others] say or do, let alone think or believe, we are not equipped to *represent* it [italics added]." (ibid: 246-7) Furthermore, this has, according to Holbraad, led to confused ethnography:

> Diviners' claim […] is not just to truth, but rather to a kind of truth that has also been something of a holy grail in the Western tradition of reasoning, namely indubitable truth. Having missed this distinction, anthropologists have effectively assumed that divinatory verdicts could only issue truths that are inherently open to doubt. This misinterprets the ethnography of divination and thereby also prejudices its analysis. (ibid: 55)

Now, in light of the preceding chapters it is arguable that Holbraad's "anthropologists" are straw-men. As noted in section 3.1.1, Tambiah, rather than forcing the notion of representational truth upon his informants, analyzes ritual acts in terms of efficacy and ineptness. Even though Holbraad dedicates a couple of paragraphs to explaining how his account differs from

Tambiah's, no clear distinction is arrived at.[29] Accordingly, Hoolbrad's data should not strike us as quite so inexplicable as he makes it out to be; rather, they invite an opportunity to showcase a possible application of *p*-symbolization. Towards this end, some ethnographic excerpts of Holbraad's revolving around oracular utterances and the notion of *aché* are cited. As a consequence, Hoolbrad's dichotomy between the anthropologist's notion of truth and emic notions of truth is challenged: one might not need to abandon truth as representation in order to make sense of alterity. This latter point is demonstrated by applying *D1* to the case of *aché*.

All Ifá divination involves *aché*, "[a] peculiar concept-cum-substance" primarily used for rendering items employed in divination effective (ibid: 156). *Aché* has two senses: it refers both to concrete powder and to the concept of power. Holbraad sets out to formulate the "clear logical connection" between these two conceptions of *aché*, as such a connection is assumed by *babalawos*. The connection is summarized informally as follows:

> On the one hand, to have the power of aché as a diviner one must be properly consecrated as a
> babalawo and this […] involves receiving and knowing how to use the consecrated equipment,

---

29 The paragraph in question reads:

> Tambiah's turn to performativity is proposed explicitly as a turn away from questions about the truth-value of ritual utterances, inasmuch as they adopt the philosophical assumption that truth must be, to recall Austin's famous distinction, a matter of word's capacity to say things rather than do them […] by contrast, *my interest is in developing an analysis of divinatory speech acts that places their claim to truth at the core of their performative character*. Cutting across the Austinian axiom of saying versus doing, my question is about how divinatory utterances are able to *do truth* […] [italics added] (Holbradd, 2012: 58)

First off, the truth values of the locutionary act notwithstanding, Austin does not analyze performatives taken as wholes (i.e. sums of locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts) in terms of their truth value; instead, perforamtives are happy or unhappy (Austin, 1955: 45, 133). Secondly, there is no reference to where Austin erects the alleged axiom of saying *versus* doing. Rather, perforamtives involve saying *and* doing as the locutionary and illocutionary aspects are inseparable (ibid: 133). Lastly, the italicized statement is quite opaque: what does it mean to place truth at the heart of a performative character? How does this differ from regarding transformation of a state of affairs as an illocutionary force? Tambiah explicitly favors the illocutionary aspects and downplays the locutionary act and its epistemological baggage.

charged with the powder of aché. *No powder no power*, so to speak. On the other hand, the secret knowledge required to prepare aché powders and use them for Ifá is possessed only by babalawos […] Thus, preparing and using these powders is within the power of babalawos exclusively – so, *no power no powder* also [italics added]. (ibid: 157)

After dismissing analyses made in terms of causality and logical necessity, Holbraad goes on to adduce his own, rather esoteric, account. Unfortunately, this exposé of Ifá ontology is outside the scope of the current paper. Be that as it may, for the present purposes it suffices to consider Holbraad's aforementioned summary of the connection between the two significations of *aché*. Seemingly, Holbraad confuses two different kinds of powers implicit in the notion of *aché*: on the one hand, the consecrating power of powder and, on the other hand, the power enjoyed by *babalawos using* the powder to consecrate with. Indeed, Holbraad himself writes of *aché* as an "enabling condition *or* power [italics added]." (ibid: 154) Moreover, the statement that "[d]ivining powder […] is considered magically potent in its own right" (ibid: 132) suggests that there is no use aspect involved in the power of the powder, an aspect integral in the power of the *babalawo*. Toward the end of demonstrating the applicability of *D1*, let the consecrating power enjoyed by powder be denoted *power$_1$* and the power enjoyed by *babalawos* to use powder to consecrate with be denoted *power$_2$* and consider the following statement:

"A *babalawo* uses powder to *p*-symbolize power$_1$"

Upon interpreting this in light of *D1*, the relation between the two senses of *aché* – on the one hand powder and, on the other hand, power – is clarified. Firstly, powder is an object figuring in some analogy. Secondly, power$_1$ is a desirable property sought to be transferred to a neophyte. Thirdly, the employment of powder by a *babalawo* to initiate a neophyte imposes a status function – that of a *babalawo* – onto the neophyte. In turn, this status function carries deontic powers such as the right to use powder to consecrate. But this is power$_2$, so power$_2$ is a deontic power imposed on the neophyte upon initiation by a declarative ritual act exploiting some analogy. The analogy in question can be mapped as:

Power$_1$	:	Power$_2$
Powder	:	Neophyte

The property of power$_1$ – the ability to consecrate items – is transferred to the neophyte upon initiation by the a declarative ritual act in which the *babalawo* ceremonially marks the body of the neophyte with powder, thus putting him in the same favorable relation to power$_2$ as powder has to power$_1$ and, consequently, rendering the neophyte powerful; "[j]ust as the powder babalawos use on their divining board is powerful […] consecrated objects and the initiates' marked bodies are powerful ('have aché')" (ibid: 168). The bracketed expression concluding the preceding quote refers to power$_2$, the power enjoyed by *babalawos* to use consecrated items and, ultimately, consecrate other neophytes.[30] In short: power$_1$ is a desirable property and power$_2$ is a deontic power carried by the status function of *babalawo*. Moreover, the standing declaration corresponding to power$_1$ reads: "if a powder is manipulated by a *babalawo*, then it has power$_1$ and can be used to consecrate neophytes during initiation", whereas the one concerning power$_2$ yields: "if a neophyte is initiated by a *babalawo*, then he has power$_2$ – the right to use powder to consecrate in divination." Note that both these standing declarations involve the respective explicit declarative ritual acts of manipulation and initiation. Standing declarations enabling the aforementioned declarative ritual act, on the other hand, do not necessarily contain explicit declarative ritual acts. For instance, there is a rule stating that only heterosexual males are allowed to enter into to the Ifá cult (ibid: 93).

According to *D1*, the declarative ritual act involves a verbal act stating the analogical reasoning behind the operation. However, since Holbraad does not discuss the relation between the verbal and nonverbal ritual acts in sufficient detail, such an analysis is difficult to conduct. The most potent evidence of analogical reasoning is found in the description of the preparatory stages of divination, where the *babalawo* first tastes the powder with his tongue and then uses it to mark his forehead. This procedure is accompanied by the rest of the attending *babalawos'*

---

30 Examples of the many desire independent reasons for action created by the status function of *babalawo* can easily be multiplied: "the crucial leap from just being able to participate in rituals to gaining the *right* to dispense them oneself is only achieved by those practitioners who 'make themselves Ifá' by undergoing the weeklong initiation ceremony [italics added]", "Only babalawos are *entitled* to disperse Ifá rituals [italics added]." (Holbraad, 2012: 90) and only initiated have "the *right* to wear consecrated insignia, such as bracelets (*iddé*) and necklaces (*collares*), which are deemed to contain divine power in their own right [italics added]." (ibid: 124) In line with the methodological commitment made in footnote 28, these notes indicate that the informants in question recognize concepts such as obligations, duties and rights.

exclamation, "Niwawaché!", translating "the power has arrived!" (ibid: 156). One possible interpretation of this situation is that the verbalized speech act renders the marked *babalawo* powerful (in the sense of power$_2$). Among Holbraad's general notes on the verbalized ritual acts involving *aché* one finds multiple examples of similar evocation of power. For instance; "[t]he importance of aché as […] power is enshrined in the liturgy of the divinatory ritual, with babalawos *invoking it by name* as part of the various incantations that have to be chanted to achieve a successful divination [italics added]" (ibid: 154) and the expression "Addaché!" which, according to Holbraad, is a verbal evocation of the power of *aché* uttered by the *babalawos* (ibid: 155). Rather than providing conclusive evidence for the interpretation of *aché* advanced at the moment, such ethnographical notes may point in a favorable direction.

It has been argued that the relationship between *aché* as powder and *aché* as power can be elucidated through the notion of *p*-symbolization: The desirable property of power$_1$ is *p*-symbolically transferred to the neophyte, thus granting him the status function of *babalawo* and power$_2$. This is achieved by bringing the *aché* powder in contact with the neophyte's body during initiation. This analysis (if valid) appears to entail that the dichotomy postulated by Holbraad between truth as representation and emic conceptions of truth is a false one. Truth as representation and emic notions of truth belongs to different levels of analysis: there is nothing contradictory about *representing* emic notions of truth – even if the latter does not itself involve representational aspects. Since an independent argument showing the illegitimacy of representation – even if the notions involved in the anthropologist's representation do not carry ontological baggage exceeding that of the informants (see footnote 28) – is left wanting, Holbraad's antirepresentationalism seems somewhat premature. Note that this last point is somewhat secondary and in dire need of further justification. The purpose of this section is chiefly demonstrational: the application under current scrutiny is produced for the purpose of demonstrating the possibility of subsuming oracular ritual acts (truth-claims proper as well as nonverbal acts) under the notion of *p*-symbolization. This being said, it goes without saying that it is a vastly underinformed interpretation of Holbraad's ethnographical data. At best, it gives a *prima facie* justification for the merits of *D1*.

4 Conclusion

The discussion is now led into conclusion by a terse reproduction of the overall argument. Thus, the connection between the various lines of reasoning developed during the course of the paper will be made reviewable.

In section 2, it was demonstrated that Geertz and Turner respectively attribute to the notion of *symbolization* the logical structure "*X* symbolizes *Y* in *C*" – which we labeled "the general formula" – where *X* denotes the set of symbols, *Y* refers to the set of significata and *C* ranges over the kind of social context. It was noted that Geertz and Turner drew on different aspects of the general formula: Geertz's chiefly focused on the extension of the *X*-term and the nature of the symbol. Fundamentally, Geertz regards the symbol as the primary means for human cognition and reduces the entirety of social reality to symbolic behavior. Famously, Geertz presents the Balinese cockfight as a symbolic nexus through which the participants contemplate the entire social system. Turner, on the other hand, is concerned with symbols employed in ritual. However, by conducting a tripartite analysis of symbolic meaning, Turner places great emphasis on the relation *symbolize* and the scope of the *Y*-term. For instance, the Ndembu milk tree is claimed to symbolize everything from breasts to the continuity of Ndembu society. On Turner's view, the signification of a certain symbol is reached by means of monitoring emic exegesis, particularly how the symbol is used in ritual and what the informants say of it.

The respective reproductions of Geertz and Turner's theories were succeeded by a demonstration of their shortcomings. In Geertz's case, this was accomplished through Jarvie's critique, according to which the attribution of a symbolic dimensions to behavior and statements tends to be done arbitrarily. The problematic parts of Turner's theory were isolated by observing Sperber's critique. Essentially, Sperber argues that the relation postulated by Turner between symbol and interpretation really is a relation between symbol and *motivation* for a translation. Further, apart from being *ad hoc* and non-generalizable, such motivations are themselves symbolic and objects for interpretation in their own right.

From these critiques, three criteria that need be considered by an adequate theory of symbolization were deduced: (1) *The criterion of distinguishability*, according to which a theory

of symbolization need include at least one un-arbitrary mechanism for determining whether a statement or act is symbolic or practical, (2) *the criterion of evaluation*, stating that a theory of symbolization need involve at least one mechanism for evaluating contesting interpretations of symbolic statements or acts and, lastly, (3) *the criterion of closure*, according to which a theory of symbolization need include a univocal decoding relation holding between symbol and interpretation, closing the given set of {symbol, interpretation} pairs to the effect of excluding the postulation of *ad hoc* and un-generalizable relations between symbol and interpretation. Whereas the criterion of distinguishability concerns the detection of symbolic acts and statements, the criterion of closure concerns the relation between symbol and interpretation – the meaning-relation, in Sperber's terms.

Seeing as Geertz and Turner's respective theories were quite all-embracing, section 3 argued that specificity might be a feature conducive for satisfying the three criteria. For the purpose of demonstration, Tambiah's theory of ritual efficacy was presented. Ultimately, Tambiah's theory explains ritual efficacy in terms of analogical reasoning and performativity: verbal and non-verbal ritual acts are Austinian speech acts exploiting some analogy and, in the same stroke, transforming some state of affairs simply by being enacted. Correspondingly, another clause – "*A* uses" – was added to the general formula which then read "*A* uses *x* to symbolize *Y* in *C*". Apart from delimiting the scope of the notion of symbolization to a substantially higher degree than Geertz and Turner managed, Tambiah directs his account at a specific social phenomenon (i.e. ritual efficacy). This twofold specificity proved paramount for satisfying the three criteria and was therefore elaborated upon in the subsequent sections.

The elaboration reached its acme in section 3.3, where a specified version of Tambiah's model was stated to the effect of clarifying the relation between the notion of symbolization and that of deontic power. Leaning on Searle's conceptual apparatus – predominantly the notion of a declarative speech act – the refined analysis replaced the vagueness inherent in its predecessor with a narrower scope. For instance, curative rituals were excluded. Consecutively, the merits of this version – labeled *p*-symbolization – were demonstrated by considering Holbraad's ethnographic puzzle of *aché*.

In the end, the current paper hopefully provides a new perspective on what Cohen holds to be the central theoretical problem in social anthropology: the relationship between symbolic action and power.

5 References

Austin, J. L., (1955) *How to Do Things with Words* Oxford University Press.

Baert, P., (2005) *Philosophy of the Social Sciences: Towards Pragmatism*, Polity Press.

Cohen, A., (1974) *Two-Dimensional Man: An essay on the anthropology of power and symbolism in complex society*, Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd.

Crick, M. R., (1982) "Anthropology of Knowledge", *Ann. Rev. Anthrop.* 1982, 11:287-313

Douglas, M., (1970) *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology*, Routledge Classics.

Durkheim, E., (1982) *The Rules of Sociological Method and Selected Texts on Sociology and its Method*, The Macmillan Press Ltd.

Firth, R., (1973), *Symbols: Public and Private*, Cornell University Press.

Föllesdal, D., Wallöe, L. and Elster, J., (2001) *Argumentationsteori, språk och vetenskapsfilosofi*, Thales.

Geertz, C., (1973) *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books Inc.

Gell, A., (1998), *Art and Agency*, Clarendon Press.

Holbraad, M., (2012), *Truth in Motion: The Recursive Anthropology of Cuban Divination* The University of Chicago Press.

Jarvie, I. C., (1976) "On the Limits of Symbolic Interpretation in Anthropology", Current Anthropology, 4: 687-701.

Lambek, M., (2008) *A reader in the Anthropology of Religion*, 2nd edition, Blackwell Publishing.

Langer, S. K., (1951), *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art,* 3rd edition, Harvard University Press.

Leach, E., (1966) "Virgin Birth", *Proceedings of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 0: 39-49.

Lindberg, C., (2005), *Nya Antropologiska Porträtt*, Lund Monographs in Social Anthropology.

Mauss, M., (1950) *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, Routledge.

McGee, J. R., and Warms, R. L. (2012) *Anthropological Theory: An Introductory History*, 5th edition, McGraw-Hill.

Munn, N., (1973) "Symbolism in Ritual Context: Aspects of Symbolic Action", *Handbook of Social and Cultural Anthropology*, edt. J.J. Honigman, Chicago: Rand McNally

Ortner, S., (1974) "Is female to male as nature is to culture?", *Woman, culture, and society*: 68-87, Stanford University Press.

Ryle, G., (1949) *The Concept of Mind*, The University of Chicago Press.

Sahlins, M., (1976) *Culture and Practical Reason*, The University of Chicago Press.

Searle, J. R.,

— (1969), *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*, Cambridge University Press.

— (2010), *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization*, Oxford University Press.

— (2006a) "Social Ontology: Some Basic Principles", *Anthropological Theory*, 6: 12-29.

— (2006b) "Searle versus Durkheim and the waves of thought: Reply to Gross", *Anthropological Theory*, 6: 57-69.

Sperber, D., (1975), *Rethinking Symbolism*, Cambridge University Press.

Tambiah, S. J., (1985), *Culture, Thought, and Social Action: An Anthropological Perspective*, Harvard University Press.

Thomasson, A., (2003), "Foundations for a Social Ontology", *Proto-Sociology: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Research*, 18–19: 269–290.

Turner, V., (1967), *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*, Cornell University Press.